



水瀬葉月
Illustration さよりがため

3
—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious
XVI
episode CLOSE / the first part

電撃文庫



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Cube×Cursed×Curious
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「じいを我が地じい
禍具を蒐集し破壊せよ、騎士達よ」

Yes My lord
『是なり、我が領主！』

トリナーク・アガナー

蒐集戦線騎士領の領主。
夜知家を含む大秋高校
付近一帯を第二の領地
とすべくイギリスより
やってきた。

タシターン・チャッターボックス

領主を支援する主幹後
方支援員。軽薄に見え
るが、仕事に関しては
完璧主義者。《悪魔の
大い》なる禍具を使う。

Scene01:蒐集戦線騎士領



「……人形原黒絵。」
俺のものになれ！

マクシミリアン・
ペンドラゴン

ドラコニアンズ
竜島／竜頭師団の師
団長。最強への妨げと
なる老いを克服するた
め、人間の精気を操る
黒絵に目をつける。

グランオーリ

先代の第一位よりペ
ンドラゴンに受け継が
れた《忠義を届けし折
れ槍》と呼ばれる禍
具。

リコ

常にペンドラゴンに
纏わりついている幼
女。その正体は《死
骸鎧リコンガロウ》
という鎧の禍具。

ドラコニアンズ
Scene02:竜島／竜頭師団



わたしが春亮くんを
「この歴史が、詰まっているんです」

むら まさ
村正
春亮に白
腹が据
夜知家
どんな
い覚悟

ペンドラゴンとのバトルで狂気に吞まれ春亮を傷つけてしまう。自責の念から立方体の姿になってしまうが――。

春亮に告白をしてから、
腹が据わった感あり。
夜知家を守るために、
どんな手段も厭わない
覚悟を決める。

呪われた道具と人との
繋がりを考える場所と
して《夜知家》のスタ
ンスを宣言するも、直
後に危機に見舞われる。

Scene03: 夜知家



わたしが春亮くんを
「た歴史が詰まっているんです」

むら まさ
村正
春亮に白
腹が据
夜知家
どんな
い覚悟

ペンドラゴンとのバトルで狂気に吞まれ春亮を傷つけてしまう。自責の念から立方体の姿になってしまうが――。

春亮に告白をしてから、
腹が据わった感あり。
夜知家を守るために、
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ンスを宣言するも、直
後に危機に見舞われる。



「俺は……お前らはすしやうじにうていらつて言った。それを嘘にはしない。絶対に」

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



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Prologue

Part 1

Alone inside her own room, she was sitting with knees drawn up to her chest.

Her face was forcefully buried between her thighs. Her long silver hair dangled on the left and right sides, forming a tiny inviolable room in front of her chest where none could trespass. An extremely small space filled only with her thoughts—Or one could call it a cage.

Her shoulders kept trembling. Hence, the cage trapping those irregular breaths also shook continually. And just like a rain leak, warm water droplets kept dripping down from the top of the cage.

(I can't believe... I...!)

If one were to paint this cage with color, the utter pitch-blackness of darkness would be the only possibility.

Regret, despair, self-loathing, fear, sorrow. The same color as these emotions.

With black as the background, a scene surfaced in her view. As branded, engraved on her retina, that scene persisted forever.

That of Haruaki's left hand, with the missing fingers.

(Sob... Sob...)

She—had done something irrevocable.

Unbelievably. Unbelievably. Unbelievably unbelievably unbelievably, she had— Was it unavoidable, in order to protect him? An excuse. He was harmed as a result. Stupid. She had failed to consider the worst case scenario. Despite knowing clearly it was very risky. Too naive. Too confident in herself. Too complacent. She had made a great mistake. Why was she so hopelessly incurable? She really wanted to start over again. But starting over was impossible. Why?

—Die, die, die.

—Her foolish self should just die already. Break. Disappear—

With feelings of resignation and self-abandonment, she kept rejecting herself nonstop. That was all a prisoner aware of one's crimes could do.

However, at this moment—

"...!"

Suddenly, she noticed what seemed to be a commotion happening outside her room. Something was happening in this house that had been shrouded in silence and gloom until now. Needless to say—

Him... He probably woke up at last.

After many hours, she lifted her dainty face from between her knees, letting the long-absent air from outside enter the tightly shut cage. Likewise for her face, drenched with tears, she experienced the empty coolness indifferently.

Having received treatment, he had slept the whole time till now. Knowing he had woke up, what she felt inside was—

Relief, as well as—

So massive that those emotions, circling nonstop inside the cage so far, could not compare at all—

Terror.

She really wanted to see him. She really wanted to talk to him, face to face, She really wanted to converse with him. But she also did not want to see him. She did not want to converse with him. So scary. So scary. So scary so scary so scary—!

Hence, when she noticed that movement had resumed in the house, when hurried footsteps soon made their way straight towards her room...

With her mind totally blank, she did the one thing in her power—

Part 2

Un Izoey squinted and looked out of the classroom window, towards that scene.

The sports ground below. The giant helicopter descended from the sky. The girl wearing the visor-like helmet, waiting for the helicopter's arrival, as well as the man standing at the opened rear cabin door, receiving a spear from her hand.

"—Well then, let the founding of the 'Second Knights Dominion' begin."

As though long awaiting these words, new movements appeared from behind the man as figures exited the helicopter one after another. There were men and women of varying ages, but they were all dressed fairly uniformly. Virtually everyone was clad in an inconspicuous outfit resembling a gray coat with faint glimpses of armor underneath, very much in the style of knights.

Silently, they walked past the lord standing at the rear cabin door to arrive in Taishyuu High's sports ground. Then without anyone issuing orders, they lined up in a neat formation.

Seeing that, the nearby students all asked among themselves: "Who are they? Is this some kind of shoot?" Listening to their noisy chattering, Un Izoey trembled all over.

(Numbers... Too many. This has surpassed the level of a 'knight squad.' A greater collective—the assembly of multiple 'knight squads' to form the ultimate "legion"...))

If the squad led by Lilyhowell Kilmister during the welcoming festival was the average size—Then the scattered knights in view numbered three times bigger. In other words, this legion consisted of at least three "knight squads" as well as the three or more powerful squad leaders commanding them.

Un Izoey recalled what her own leader had said before. They are simply drawing out their true power at last, to seriously obliterate the so-called 'Yachi House.' Did true power refer to these great numbers?

During her contemplation, the stream of knights marching out of the helicopter ended. Without much apparent emotional reaction, the Dominion Lord glanced at the knights in formation before him. Then he turned around and returned to the helicopter's interior—

Soon after, he returned, *sitting in a wheelchair*.

Un Izoey frowned slightly but immediately remembered. It was from the knowledge conveyed through the Lab Chief's habitual chatting.

This was the curse of «Dieu le veut», the spear forming the backbone of the organization known as the Knights Dominion, held by the Dominion Lord.

Namely, *the owner's life was confined within the territory's boundary*. The curse apparently carried reverse significance as well, but that had little to do with the situation at hand.

In other words, given that particular curse, he should not have been able to leave the Dominion's headquarters in England in the first place. He should have died as soon as he left—Because this land of Japan had yet to be established as their territory, even though prior preparations had been made in full.

In spite of that, the Dominion Lord was still here. As for how that was achieved—

(It is already known. That helicopter and wheelchair are precisely what the Lab Chief had mentioned—«Mobile Territory: Zilch Ground», I judge with this kind of judgement.)

Apart from the spear in his hand, another identical spear was inserted vertically on the back of the wheelchair as well. No mistake, that was «Dieu le veut» too—Unlike the several other spears used to define the territory of the Knights

Dominion's headquarters, this one had been used for mobility from the start. A spear producing a personal mobile territory.

Naturally, «Dieu le veut»'s power could not be used directly on inorganic steel such as a helicopter's. It was said that a thin layer of soil had to be laid on the helicopter's floor first before planting the spear tip. In other words, until now, that spear had defined the fuselage as the "territory" where he could live.

Moreover, because a helicopter alone would be too limiting in scope, they had evidently designed the spear-embedded part to be wholly detachable. The spear, the floor with soil where the spear was stabbed, a chair placed on top—In other words, the wheelchair where the Dominion Lord was sitting right now. Described another way, the wheelchair with the attached spear had been installed as a seat in the helicopter. What appeared to be the base at the bottom, with the spear planted in it, was probably covered with bloodstained soil just like the interior of the helicopter.

Sitting in the wheelchair known as Zilch Ground, the Dominion Lord slowly left the helicopter's sloping rear cabin exit. Instead of using his own hands to turn the wheels, he was being pushed from behind by a gaudily dressed woman who had apparently remained in the helicopter until the last moment.

Then the wheelchair—and with it, the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion Lord—finally descended upon the sports ground. The woman pushing the wheelchair and Sleif, who had had been kneeling quietly on standby, silently joined the ranks of the knights.

Seated on the wheelchair, the Dominion Lord swept his gaze across them.

"—Knights."

His voice was very calm. However, it was possible to feel the knights filling up with tension just from this one word.

"A foolish question, yet I must ask... Are you imbeciles?"

"No, my lord!"

An answer in unison. The intangible and invisible pressure could be felt even from across the glass of the classroom window. The noisy students instantly shut their mouths.

During this time, the dialogue between the Dominion Lord and his knights continued.

"Are you retards?"

"No, my lord!"

"Are you fools?"

"No, my lord!"

"Indeed. You are neither imbeciles, retards, nor fools. You are proud knights."

While speaking, the Dominion Lord used the wheelchair's footrest directly as a pedestal and leisurely stood up straight. Taking the spear in his hand—«Dieu le veut»—he raised it before him.

"In that case, knights, what is your objective? Answer me, Dainsleif."

"To gather and destroy loathsome Wathes!"

The helmeted maiden knight replied instantly. Her entire body trembled as though from joy as well as self-contempt.

"What is your justice, knights? Answer me, Taciturn Chatterbox."

"To gather and destroy loathsome Wathes. There's nothing else apart from that, right~?"

The flamboyant woman who had been pushing the wheelchair, wearing a pointed hat like a witch's, replied instantly. She shrugged and laughed, causing a large conical object hanging at her waist to shake as well.

The Dominion Lord's solemn expression did not change the slightest.

"Precisely. Our objective, justice, future, present, meaning, faith, morality, laws, dreams, desires, hopes, wishes—Everything is for this. More than any other existence in the world, driven with reckless abandon, only acting for this purpose, that is who we are. No one walks along this path of orthodoxy more firmly than we. Where we stand is forever the most forward of the frontlines."

Saying that, he suspended the spear vertically and tapped its end hard on the ground before the wheelchair.

Then staring at the knights, he said:

"Well then—Is this place the same?"

"Yes, my lord!"

They concurred in unison with even greater vigor than before. The Dominion Lord slowly moved the spear tip and pointed at each knight in turn from the start to the end of the line.

"Indeed—Truly a foolish question. You have sacrificed everything. God shall bless those who sacrifice everything. Hence, these are God's orders."

The Dominion Lord paused for a moment, as though waiting for the knight's backs to shudder, then continued:

"Knights, turn this place into my territory, gather Wathes, and destroy them."

"Yes, my lord!"

The Lord raised his arm high, twirling «Dieu le veut» overhead for half a revolution, then held the spear in a reverse grip.

Then closing his eyes lightly, he resumed in a whisper:

"In that case, this land shall confer even greater power upon you. A war blessed by God is a crusade. This is the location of that which we gather and destroy. Then this place is the crusade's frontline—In other words, this land ought to be called the Holy Land—"

Instantly, he applied greater force through his arm, still holding the spear above his head.

"Hence—I, Trinac Agana, hereby proclaim: The Second Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion shall be founded at this location! Just like the crusader knights who had fought to protect the Holy Land in the past, shout! God wills it, in other words, Dieu le veut!"

"Dieu le veut!"

The knights responded thunderously. At the same time—

The Dominion Lord swung his arm down, stabbing «Dieu le veut» towards the ground.

Then as though accommodating the knights' shouting whose echoes were dissipating into the surroundings, the Dominion Lord lightly let go of the spear.

The spear did not fall over, standing upright in the center of the sports ground. However—

"..."

Un Izoey narrowed her eyes. Using vision she had honed through hunting in the jungle, she focused her gaze on that one point.

Namely, the point of contact between the spear tip and the ground. Despite being swung down with such great force, *the spear had not stabbed into the ground*. No, strictly speaking, it had, but only the first few millimeters of the spear tip. Just by relying on this meager support, «Dieu le veut» remained vertically upright in a physically impossible manner—

(...This too is also known.)

This was a Wathe for "territorialization" according to the owner's will, going as far as to alter the land's original meaning. All things considered, such a powerful effect could not possibly take hold in merely an instant.

Territorialization would progress gradually. Currently, the spear tip was still standing unnaturally, but with the passage of time, it would slowly embed itself into the ground. The town would reach complete territorialization the instant when the spear tip became completely buried in the soil.

Un Izoey sighed gloomily. In any case, it was starting after all.

The Dominion Lord's action just now was equivalent to pressing the start switch. In other words, unless that spear was destroyed, or the owner killed, the switch controlling further developments could not be stopped.

In that case, what should she do?

Where should she stand and what course of action should she take—?

The answer to this question was still unknown, but...

On the other hand, among the known facts told to her by the Lab Chief, there was something she believed was of paramount importance right now, producing a continuous sense of foreboding in her mind. Throbbing like an annoying headache, it reminded her not to forget its existence.

Once «Dieu le veut» activated...

Until the target zone completely "territorialized"—

There was only a buffer period of roughly twenty-four hours.

Part 3

Haruaki sat up in bed.

"Haruaki-kun!"

"Yachi, are you alright?"

"Haru, it's best if you don't move."

Gathered around the futon, the girls kept calling his name. However, these calls only entered his ears vaguely without reaching his brain, unrecognized as meaningful sounds.

Conversely, something else was occupying his entire mind. Something very ambiguous yet extremely heavy in mass at the same time. Surely... One would call it a memory.

Slowly, it thawed. Slowly, it diffused to him.

The large number of Indulgence Disks from his father, as well as the night he had spent with Fear. The morning when everyday life had resumed. He remembered seeing her face, he had felt very shy and embarrassed. Then after that—Oh right, someone made a phone call. A sudden call. It was Maximilian Pendragon, Commander of the Draconians.

He said he wanted to hand over the spear that Kirika wanted to destroy. Hence, Haruaki's group had gone over to the fleet serving as the Draconian headquarters, facing off against the Draconians again on the duel ship for the meeting—

Haruaki's memory suddenly flashed. For merely an instant, chronological order seemed to scatter and mix. Only emotions surfaced from within.

Terror and fear. Sweat and pain. Oh right. He had heard—a voice.

The sound of laughter.

He stared wide-eyed. At the same time, he felt the frozen memories disappear like a melting glacier, spreading thickly inside his heart.

Laughing loudly, she was holding a drill in each hand. Taking a mighty leap, she pounced on Pendragon. Haruaki could not remember clearly what happened after that. Just a jumble of vague memories. Laughter. The crash of two gigantic entities colliding. The aftershock caused the ship to shake unsteadily. She had vanished at some point. Beneath the deck which was tearing apart, one could feel the movements of a dragon and something rivaling a dragon. Then the ship wailed in its final moments.

Right. Then...

The ship tilted dramatically—

At the same time, she had leapt up from the depths of the deck's dark crevice—

In order to catch her, he had spread his arms at her landing spot—

However, she had raised her drill in midair and swung it down at him while keeping the same smile on her face—

"—!"

Haruaki suddenly kicked his blanket away and stood up when his memories reached this point.

"H-Haruaki-kun! If you move suddenly, your body will...!"

Without any thoughts to spare on listening to Konoha, he moved his body, driven by sheer impulse. Dodging Konoha's extended hand that was intended to stop him, he ran out of the room where he had been sleeping until now. His legs were lacking in strength and his sense of balance felt off. Stumbling for a moment, he smashed his shoulder against a pillar in the corridor. Suddenly feeling something was not right, he looked at his left hand—

"..."

There was only emptiness at the former locations of his ring and little fingers.

Seeping red, the bandage was only wrapped around the base of the fingers.

But—*So what?*

"Yachi, hold on, hey!"

The girls exited his bedroom, chasing after him. As though trying to shake them off, Haruaki started walking, advancing along the corridor.

All he felt was numbness from his left hand. It was not particularly painful. Were his sensory nerves malfunctioning temporarily? Or had he left his sense of pain behind in that vast ocean? But needless to say, he did not care either.

The destination was before his eyes.

Mustering all his strength, Haruaki pulled open the sliding door that was tightly shut as though rejecting everything.

Then calling her name as hard as he could, he stepped into the room—At the same time, he prayed in his heart that he had made it in time.

"Fear!"

No response.

Haruaki's right hand, leaning on the sliding door, slowly fell down.

Her room was the same as usual. A messy room. Worn clothing scattered all over the floor. Empty bags of rice crackers.

Amidst everything—Her figure.

Her figure as a cube of pure steel.

"Fear..."

He called out again but still no response.

However, he knew that she was definitely listening to his voice. He felt that there was breathing sufficient to prove her existence. Her consciousness was there. He understood her very well, to the point that he could be this certain.

Even so, she still did not answer.

Refusing, and resisting as well—

Contact with the outside world.

Expressing her will to the outside world.

Escaping inward, hiding inside, building a wall—

She had withdrawn herself.

Hiding in the depths of the extremely sturdy shell of steel known as herself.

Haruaki slowly walked into the room and looked down at her silent self.

In a calm voice, with a calm expression, he said:

"My goodness... You're such a great big idiot..."

Then all he could do was, lightly, tenderly, using his hand with the missing fingers...

He caressed her skin that he had touched countless times before.

He caressed the cold corners of the steel cube.

Chapter 1 - The Withdrawn Cube / "Cage x Collapse x Chivalrous"

Part 1

Her master was currently sitting in the wheelchair. Sleif—the demonic sword Dainsleif—followed his gaze, staring at «Dieu le veut» standing upright on the ground surface. In order to confirm its state.

As kindred, she could sense the cursed aura released from the spear. It was operational indeed. The prior preparations she had undertaken in this town were not in vain. Likewise for the bloodshed and pain suffered by that lowly allegedly immortal girl.

"Looks like it's definitely operating properly, isn't it~? Standing perfectly straight, it's truly wonderful~"

Taciturn was giggling while she spoke. Sleif was displeased to see her act so frivolously in front of the master, but that was how Taciturn always behaved. The master whispered:

"A foolish question—Anything else would be troublesome."

"Then the only thing left to do is wait. Everything is progressing so smoothly~"

Sleif could not ignore these words. Turning her helmeted face towards Taciturn, she said:

"Do not lower your guard, Taciturn Chatterbox. It is our turn to enter the stage. Until territorialization completes, twenty-four hours remain—We must guard the spear until then."

"Yes yes yes, I got it~ To perform territorialization in such a conspicuous place, it goes without saying that a certain group will interfere."

"Carelessness would be folly. Preparation is essential. Before this place becomes a castle, it must first be made into a stronghold. Dainsleif, instruct the knights to start establishing a stronghold."

"Acknowledged."

Hearing the master, Dainsleif turned around and issued directions to the knights in formation awaiting orders.

Having received their task, the knights returned to the "mobile territory" of the transport helicopter and started to move supplies. These were supplies for setting up camp, including tent equipment, rations, weapons and various sundries.

Needless to say, the place where the master was staring at, with «Dieu le veut» stabbed in the ground, would be the headquarters. With this as the center, the camp was gradually set up outwards.

Of course, this could not compare to the Knights Dominion's headquarters in the homeland, but the camp still followed the style and overall layout back home.

Indeed—This was equivalent to a "throne room" despite serving as temporary headquarters. Upon the pride of knights, this place must be presentable.

The knights started to build a raised level above the ground, similar to a throne's platform, so as to house the master's wheelchair. Then from the entrance of the soon-to-be erected tent all the way to the throne, a red carpet was laid to enhance the atmosphere of an audience hall. Then several sets of silver armor were moved out of the mobile territory and carefully lined up on the left and right sides of the carpet. Though they may take up a lot of room, these were indispensable furnishings. As for decorations, there was a practical and high-class work desk, a vase on the desk, candlesticks for illumination, embroidery on the tent fabric—All sorts of things. Apart from this throne room that was to be temporary headquarters, they also planned to set up several tents for the knights to rest, but that could wait until later.

Looking at the knights setting up camp progressively, Taciturn suddenly cocked her head and asked:

"Miss Dainsleif, as important setting up headquarters may be, isn't there something else of higher priority? Doesn't establishing a stronghold mean more than that? If you were to forget, I would be forced to laugh and jeer at you, yes?"

"Please stop talking incomprehensibly. Your worries are redundant. I have already issued orders for «Auschwitz-Birkenau» to be prepared."

"Oh dear, really~? Very well. But on further thought, why do I get the feeling that using *that* might be making mountains out of molehills?"

The master answered this question.

"Caution above all else. Now that it is decided for this land to become the Second Knights Dominion, failure is absolutely not an option."

"That I do understand."

"If someone were to obstruct the founding of our territory—Fear-in-Cube's group is the most likely. My personality cannot allow their existence and threat to be

ignored. Even if others might view this as cowardice, it would be folly not to prepare properly in advance."

"..."

Dainsleif subconsciously pressed her hand on her own chest. She could not understand why she did so. The beating of that fake object accompanying her human form, as well as the foreign body inside her. No change came to either of them at all.

"Indeed, the necessary tasks must be finished first. Dainsleif, order Barbarossa Lee to lead a squad to move out. I need not specify the destination, do I?"

"Of course not. Nothing would be better if this squad could accomplish the task of destruction on their own, but otherwise, they could still buy time.. Depriving the enemy of the chance to take action is also a very important mission. I will tell them to do everything in their power."

"Heeheehee, in addition, things will get troublesome if they don't take this opportunity to get out~ Well then, my lord, this can't be all there is to your plan, can it? *That's why I am present.*"

"Foolish question."

The Dominion Lord turned his head lightly. The tent covering this place was still being set up with only half of the canopy erected. Hence, the view was still very open, allowing one to see—

The school building facing this sports ground, as well as the numerous students still looking at the knights' direction, most likely having no idea what was going on.

Seated in the wheelchair, the Dominion Lord looked up at them expressionlessly and whispered:

"We shall set up two barriers to guard this place. One being the physical barrier formed by «Auschwitz-Birkenau». The other being—"

"A psychological barrier. In other words, hostages whom those people absolutely cannot ignore, right?"

Taciturn rudely finished the Dominion Lord's sentence. Placing a hand on her forehead with a giggling face, she made a motion as though looking out afar. Naturally, what she looked at were also the students in the school building. Then she grinned—

"Wow~ With this, I've discovered extremely suitable things that happen to be over there. And many of them too."

Dainsleif knew in advance that things would come to this, but still, she could not help but proceed in caution. Briefly, she asked the Dominion Lord:

"Pardon my impudence, but may I inquire on the progress of negotiations?"

"Already complete. Even if this school's superintendent—Seikaibashi Gabriel—or anyone else tried recklessly to bring in the police or the media in an attempt to get in our way, there will be no effect whatsoever. Do not worry about interference from outsiders."

Seikaibashi Gabriel was apparently a man of substantial influence in this town. However—so-called connections were absolutely unable to oppose connections of greater power than one's own. The Knights Dominion had been active all over the world since a long time ago for the legitimate aim of eliminating cursed tools. Naturally, they were able to overwhelm one person's meager power as soon as they got serious.

"In other words, there is nothing to worry about? In that case, I will busy myself with a bit of work."

Legitimate aim. There was no doubt that the destruction of loathsome Wathes was a legitimate aim, but the actions taken as a means to achieving this end—namely, that of involving innocent commoners—surely most would frown at that thought, wouldn't they? At least, Dainsleif was self-aware in this regard. However, even so, establishing the Second Knights Dominion on this land, to

utterly crush and destroy Fear-in-Cube and her fellow Wathes, to obliterate their refuge as well—

This mission held priority above all else.

It was duty towards guiding the world towards the right path.

Looking left and right, Taciturn grabbed a young knight nearby.

"You'll do. Come and help me. Here, hold this."

"S-Sure. But I've been assigned a task too. Please give me some time to get someone else to take over—"

"There's no time for that~ We need time to move. Okay, walk, hurry and get moving. You won't be scolded because you are following my orders. Also, I'll treat you to a drink at least, okay? Heeheehee, I don't mind either if you would like some other reward."

Taciturn took out a small device from her pocket and handed it to the young knight, then wrapped her arm around his neck intimately and started walking. But then, she looked back slightly and said:

"Oh no, but what if he asks for a sexy reward, what should I do~? What do you think, Dainsleif?"

"Think about it yourself. Before that, stop disrupting discipline at this critical hour."

"You're so cold~ There's a full twenty-four hours ahead of us, so I just want to tell you this: staying tense all the time won't help~"

"Do not be careless. Cut the idle chatter and get to work."

As soon as Dainsleif finished, a change occurred in Taciturn's expression and appearance. Her face still displayed a teasing smile but her eyes and lips were giving off malicious airs of a taunting nature.

"Careless? Do I look careless?"

Dainsleif exhaled. She really did not want to waste time on this kind of dialogue.

"Yes. However... What matters is the actual result. As long as you produce results, I have no complaints."

"You should know, right? Despite being a carefree woman normally, I always do what needs to be done. I always finish my work completely, perfectly, absolutely splendidly, you know?"

She knew. Taciturn was indeed a perfectionist in her work—More precisely, it was not limited to work alone. Rather, *it was whenever she was taking direct action for the sake of "a certain person."*

"I hope so. Never forget that you are allowed to be so carefree only because you produce results."

"Heeheehee, that body of yours, reeking of a curse, is also allowed to exist only because you produce results, demonic sword."

Needless to say, dialogue of this sort was also the same as usual in a certain sense. Dainsleif was beginning to regret taking her seriously. Exasperated, she said:

"End of conversation. Hurry and be on your way."

"Yes yes~"

Taciturn started walking again while waving to Dainsleif over her shoulder. From the image of her back, one could not feel any remorse or hesitation towards the imminent task of taking *all the students hostage*.

This was only natural. Rather, this must be the way.

The woman who called herself the "taciturn chatterbox" was frivolous, unrefined and rude. For a human, she was absolutely the type Dainsleif disliked.

For an organization like the Knights Dominion, Taciturn was undoubtedly useful. It could be asserted that she was someone absolutely unshaken by conscience or naivete.

Indeed, she was a true perfectionist. Doing necessary things when they needed to be done, doing them no matter what the situation. Doing everything in her power, working hard to complete assigned missions impeccably. To this date, she had accomplished them all.

Whether infiltrating places reeking of feces and animal stench, conducting investigations that grated on one's willpower, cajoling with joy and humiliation, engaging in frown-inducing torture and interrogation, kidnapping while listening to the screams of young children, inflicting mind-breaking abuse, or performing underhanded and dishonorable assassinations.

The decisive condition of "necessary" was very simple.

Given just the reason that the Dominion Lord truly wished for it, she would carry out all missions without hesitation. Abandoning her usual frivolity to become a truly loyal retainer, she would sacrifice her mind, her body and everything else.

In other words, Taciturn was a *perfectionist only within the limited scope of working for the Dominion Lord*.

Because she is—The Lead Auxiliary.

Standing at the top of all auxiliaries in the Knights Dominion...

She was the one and only existence who had received the honor of acting as Dominion Lord Trinac Agana's direct auxiliary.

Part 2

How I really wish to kill, destroy her. It was anyone's guess how many times this thought crossed her mind.

Even now, her arm might take action as soon as she lowered her guard. If her gaze were to carry a blade's sharpness like her arms and legs, that block of metal would have turned into pulverized dust a long time ago, sucked into a vacuum cleaner. Sin. Punishment. Execution. A development most natural. A right most natural. A result most natural.

However—

(...)

"Hooooo—" Konoha took a deep breath slowly on purpose. She could feel all the pores on her skin still forced open by tension. As though about to charge forward any moment, her body's impulse to act autonomously still remained at the maximum limit, like water that barely avoided overflowing from a cup only due to surface tension.

And that surface tension was named rationality. That being said, who knew whether it was a necessary existence or not.

(We were definitely backed in a corner at the time. If no one did anything, it really would have developed into an unsalvageable situation...)

She closed her eyes and thought back. Overwhelming battle technique. Armor that rendered even the Counter sword skills ineffective. Herself, caught by the enemy's hand. Him, in a vulnerable state. The enemy, pulling back his bladed fist to accumulate force for a finishing blow. If time had continued to flow from that point—

Surely... Everything would have been over for everyone.

(No, but, even if that might be true...!)

Konoha shook her head, going in circles inside her mind. Agitated. If she were asked whether it was possible to forgive, naturally, the answer was unforgivable. That foolish girl had harmed his body. This was the one fact that must not be forgotten.

Sitting on the tatami floor, Konoha looked up lightly. Her view was obstructed. Sitting heavily on the table, that eyesore of a cube was to blame. Should she slice it up into a million pieces after all?

"Like I said~ You should say something at least. Staying like this forever isn't a solution, right?"

Of course, the one who had forcibly transported her to the living room, despite her current silent state, was Haruaki. Right now, he was smiling wryly and helplessly at the cube on the table, drinking tea from his cup.

Even in this kind of situation, he was still so carefree, a nice guy to a fault. She could not help but wonder how was he still able to make such an expression?

Clearly, his left hand under the table—was injured from that girl going berserk. Clearly, he had lost fingers. Clearly... they were irrecoverable.

If the fingers had simply been chopped off, perhaps swift treatment from Kuroe might have been able to reattach them. However, conditions were extremely terrible at the time. Their original foothold, the ship, had broken into two halves due to the fight between Fear and Pendragon, sending everyone into the ocean. Under those conditions, it was completely impossible to retrieve chopped fingers. As reluctant as she was to admit, simply surviving was very fortunate already. Even now, she still found it a miracle that all of them had made their way back to the superintendent's cabin cruiser.

"I've said so many times already. I'm not angry. If you hadn't done that, everything would've ended there. Everyone understands that."

"Yes..."

"Yeah, that's right—"

Kirika and Kuroe were also present. They nodded with exhausted expressions and ambiguous gazes.

They probably still had yet to sort out their emotions, Konoha thought. Had Fear not gone berserk at the time, Kirika really would have died. Pendragon was also going to use his astounding power to force Kuroe into being his. Even so—

Konoha believed that Kirika could be more angry. She believed that Kirika was entitled to this right. Her position was the same as Konoha's. Seeing his body harmed, how could she possibly stay silent—

(...No, I suppose... There is this. Speaking of rights—Perhaps I... I am the one who has no right instead...)

She felt an extremely cold pillar of ice stab into her heart.

Seeing his body harmed?

Had she forgotten? Not too long ago, had she not trampled his body as well? Had she not pierced his shoulder with her hand, feeling his flesh and blood, rubbing her thighs together in lust—?

She narrowed her eyes. In order to endure that pain, or perhaps to record that pain.

Then Konoha sighed deliberately again. Why had things turned out this way? What should they do next? She was unable to organize her thoughts.

Staring blankly at the cube on the table, she started drinking tea as well to relieve boredom. After she put down her empty teacup—

"Muramasa-sama, would you like a refill—Is what I would like to ask, but the hot water is finished. I shall go boil more."

"Oh~ Thank you~ ...Kotecchan, there are some sweet snacks at the bottom of the left cupboard, could you please bring some while you're at it~?"

Sitting uncomfortably all this time, Kotetsu swiftly got up. Seeing that, Honatsu made a request as though he suddenly remembered. All this time, Honatsu was simply sitting on the floor, leaning his back against a column in the veranda,

spacing out while gazing upwards at the ceiling. He was probably pondering something.

Sweet snacks. Sitting on a corner of the table was a dish of snacks that had been pushed aside to make way for the eyesore of a steel cube. However, the number of rice crackers on the dish remained constant the whole time as though it were the most natural thing in the world—

(Turning into a square like this, covering your ears to escape, what else could you hope to accomplish...?)

Konoha inquired of the cube using her gaze instead of turning her thoughts into words. Although she could not confirm if her question was received, she did not care either. She did not expect an answer in the first place.

The crime of harming him. She had committed the same crime before. Mistake. Penance. Karma. True nature.

As cursed tools, their destiny—

She had devoted much thought to this subject. She had no choice but to think.

However, she could not remain trapped forever in these abstract thoughts. Reality stood before them too. Pendragon wanted to obtain Kuroe, Haruaki was injured, Fear had withdrawn herself from reality.

Their next move and countermeasures must be decided first. In that case—

Just as Konoha was about to speak—

A cellphone ringtone was heard.

An inauspicious sense of déjà vu. The nightmarish events this morning had also started with a phonecall.

Haruaki subconsciously tried to open his cellphone with his left hand but then his face twisted and he switched to holding with his right. His numbed sense of pain

was probably starting to reawaken. Seeing him suffering—Konoha felt a complicated sense of pain surge in her heart too.

"...Hello?"

'Hi, it's me.'

Just from hearing this one sentence, one could tell who the caller was. Haruaki frowned. A tense atmosphere hung in the living room. Sitting on the table like an object, the cube also seemed to tense its surface of steel.

In the end, this déjà vu was right on target. Identical to last time on two points: the phonecall conveyed unfortunate news and that it was an unexpected caller.

Then the caller—Yamimagari Pakuaki—started to explain.

The terrifying situation currently taking place somewhere else outside this house—

Part 3

"Eh, what's that?"

"Who knows... They're starting to walk back and forth busily."

"And setting up tents too. What's going on?"

"Hey, students, hurry back to your seats—! Class is starting again... That should be fine, right? They didn't say anything in the staff meeting today either..."

Once disrupted, order in the classroom was hard to recover. Even the teacher standing at the lectern was tilting his head with a troubled look.

In this kind of situation, Un Izoey continued to observe intently from beside the window—the Knights Dominion's movements. Her mind was devoting all thoughts to deciding on the next course of action. Meanwhile, it was best to keep her eyes wide open to gather information, of course.

"Hmm, have a look at that tent, my dear Kana-Watson. The way I see it, this must be an unexpected surprise event that the superintendent made to look like a circus! This is his painstaking plan to reward and inject vitality into us after the exhausting exams!"

"Isn't unexpected and surprise kind of redundant in meaning? But really? Tai-Holmes! But it really looks plausible! Ah~ So that's why people are carrying things resembling swords? They're gonna perform those martial arts dances? Hmm, all mysteries are over in the name of my grandpa!"

While Taizou pretended to smoke on an invisible pipe, Kana was nodding with exaggerated motions. The two of them were standing at the adjacent window, chatting noisily, but Un Izoey was in no mood to correct them.

She was staring at the movements in the sports ground. Knights setting up tents. Knights moving supplies out. As well as—

(That is...)

A group of knights were walking to the edge of the sports ground. Staying vigilant, they checked out their surroundings without lowering their guard. Then they stopped before the fence. Next, holding a reel-like device taken from the helicopter, they started pulling a certain something out from it—

(...*Barbed wire*...?)

Un Izoey focused her gaze but reached the same conclusion. It was barbed wire, or one could call it wire fencing. The knights were swiftly and cautiously laying a small wire on the inner side of the fence, weaving it through gaps or tying other wires to secure it. The barbed wire seemed to be much longer than a few meters and the knights apparently intended to keep extending it. Splitting up, the knights continued to extend that flimsy-looking barbed wire along the fence.

Incomprehensible. Normally, wasn't barbed wire or wire fencing used as walls? This school already had fences and walls. Even if one were to encircle the school with that kind of narrow wire—

(No... In other words, there is a need to do this intentionally?)

Then that thing must be more than what its appearance suggested. In other words, that wire was useful enough that the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion went as far as to suspend its destruction—

It was cursed.

Assuming it was cursed barbed wire, what kind of curse would it carry? What kind of taboo power could be drawn out? Truly a new unknown.

Un Izoey had a foreboding feeling. Perhaps it was time to start taking action— Just as she was about to leave the window side quietly—

The faint crackling of static was heard in the classroom. It was the school's public announcement system.

'Eh—Ah~ Ah~ Testing, testing, one two three.'

Un Izoey could not ignore this voice. Whether students or teachers, everyone was looking up at the speaker where this stranger's voice was coming from. The expressions on their faces were not all the same. Some were staring in surprise, others were deeply intrigued, all of them wondering if an explanation for what was happening outside was finally coming.

The voice continued to speak. Listening to the woman's voice coming from the speaker, Un Izoey felt that something was not right. It felt very distant—like transmitted through a thin curtain—Was it her imagination? Anyway, the content of this woman's speech was more important at the moment.

'Ah~ My name is Taciturn Chatterbox. Members of the Knights Dominion should know what precautions to take next, right? Trash who don't know will have to be punished, a separate discussion. Okay? Then hurry and let's—'

"!"

This was a different kind of foreboding feeling, as though something was rushing up one's heel after stepping on something. A sensory type of fear, without any logical basis at all. It felt as though she had stepped on something. Like a ferocious beast's tail, a poisonous insect's stinger, a highly toxic wild plant.

That type of terror instantly invaded her entire body. Calves, the back of her knees, thighs, waist, then—

'—Hört!!'

The quality of the woman's voice coming from the speaker suddenly underwent a dramatic change.

It became a twisted sound enough to blow away all prior sense of dissonance. It turned into an extremely hoarse voice—Indeed, as though it had gone through an amplifier of exceedingly poor quality—

The instant she heard the twisted voice spoken in some unknown language, Un Izoey felt her instinctive chill turn into a clearer sensation, rising up along her spine. It was like a poisonous snake reaching her neck, its fangs approaching her throat while dripping with venom. This voice—This voice was very dangerous!

Every hair of hers stood on end suddenly. Instead of using her mind to think of countermeasures, her body moved automatically on its own. With her back to the speaker, her hands reached for her head—No, just as she was about to reach over—

"What's going on? Haha~ My deductions will be proven, right?"

"Hohoh~ Is it time for the murderer to confess? I was just thinking of walking on a cliff."

Right beside her, Taizou and Kana, still looking up at the speaker casually, entered her view.

Totally unaware—

Completely uninvolved with curses or the Knights Dominion—

To Yachi Haruaki's group and herself, they were simply precious classmates—

The two of them.

For an instant, their existence, and the fact that the two of them were right before her eyes, occupied her entire mind.

Without thinking, her body acted on its own again.

"Uwah!"

"Kyah?"

If one were looking for a reason, it was purely because they were *within arm's reach*—That was probably all there was to it.

Un Izoey wrapped her arms around their heads and sat down on the floor, pressed their faces against her chest then clamped her upper arms on their ears. At the same time, she managed to cover her own ears with her palms. Instantly—

Within the world where sound had become very distant...

Something happened.

Several minutes later.

Un Izoey watched that scene in surprise, still covering her ears.

Originally gathered near the windows, those students who had been watching the sports ground with interest...

Those students who had looked up at the speaker with puzzled expressions after hearing the sudden announcement...

All of them started looking around with faces that read "Eh? What was I doing just now?" In the next second—

Everyone took out their cellphone from their pocket or schoolbag, then started making calls at the same time.

Part 4

'—Hört!!'

This was the keyword required to activate the forbidden power of the cursed megaphone «Demon's Mouth», the conical device hanging at her waist. The curse of command and hypnosis had arisen from an internment camp's warden, whom everyone called a demon, who had coerced captives to listen to and obey brainwashed orders. The keyword was the first step to making use of its power.

Taking the «Demon's Mouth» out of its holder at her waist, Taciturn gripped its handle with both hands to raise it up. Keeping her lips to the microphone, she pondered.

Her mission was to take the students hostage in order to keep Fear-in-Cube's faction at bay. If an emergency arose, the students' lives could be threatened to prevent their group from invading the school. Hence—first of all, before that "emergency" arrived, the students must continue to remain in school. Furthermore, it must be as though nothing had happened, with neither resistance, opposition, rebellion nor suspicion.

During the twenty-fours before "territorialization" completed, it was not possible to subjugate all students by force and keep them subdued persistently. Even having brought the ultimate legion to this country, they did not have excess personnel to assign knights for this kind of task that would be a waste of labor and manpower.

(Well then, the actual announcement will be—)

This «Demon's Mouth» was capable of producing a simple brainwashing and hypnosis effect on those who listened to it. Similarly, its weakness was also very simple. Its effects were not 100% guaranteed. Despite being very simple to use and having powerful effects, depending on the situation, it could also be completely ineffective. Such was the paradoxical two-sided effect of this Wathe.



Specifically, a stronger the listener's vigor and willpower, the more likely they could resist even after listening to the commands issued through this megaphone. In addition, the more unnatural the hypnotic suggestion and command, the harder it was to take effect. But in this particular instant, completely oblivious students could not possibly react to her words with special vigor or resistance. Even if people involved with Wathes were present, so long as they were unaware of the «Demon's Mouth»'s details, it was impossible to be mentally prepared.

In any case, back to the hypnotic suggestion.

Simply considering the goal of "keeping the students inside the school to use as hostages when necessary," there were plenty of hypnotic suggestions to choose from. However, each of these options had their own flaws and was not the most suitable solution. For example, suggestions leading to life-threatening risk would have a high rate of resistance. Maintaining that kind of state would lead to even greater trouble. Also, she was unable to control the human body's physiological phenomena completely—Such as ordering students to remain asleep the whole time, for example. Hypnotic suggestions were not omnipotent. Depending on the content of commands, the situation could turn into chaos.

She must fulfill the Dominion Lord's orders perfectly without absolutely any compromise whatsoever.

Hence, the suggestion must be natural with the following traits—posing no direct threat to human lives, low rate of resistance, no strain imposed on the students, no provocation of opposition from the students, ideally lasting twenty-four hours, meanwhile keeping them confined in school definitely.

If possible, the suggestion would ideally conform to reality.

For example, a suggestion that would make the students act obediently as hostages for twenty-four hours without realizing they were hostages.

In fact, Taciturn had already decided what to say, but she was just going through final confirmations in her mind. Was this okay? It should be fine. She could only go ahead with this speech. It was the best answer after balancing all respects.

Taciturn took a deep breath and said:

'—Everyone listening shall forget all memories starting one hour prior to now. In addition, for the next twenty-four hours, you will likewise forget the previous hour's memories whenever an hour elapses, thus repeating in a cycle. Naturally, none of you will notice the changes in the sky from the time of the day.'

In other words, this was ordering all students and teachers, the targets of the hypnotic suggestion, to repeat the previous period and break endlessly. Suggestions took effect on the cortex, which meant that it was relatively easier to cause deviations in cognition and mixups in memory.

Taciturn continued as a followup. This part was crucial too.

'The next bell about to ring is the end-of-lesson bell from an hour ago. All intervals will be based on this. Also, for the next twenty-four hours, you will all ignore any strangers appearing inside the school as well as movements related to them, as though you had not seen anything.'

She could feel her words turning into a curse, flying off somewhere else. Presumably due to using a cursed ability, she felt a sense of exhaustion and chill attack her back, goosebumps developing and an instant rise in heart rate.

There was more to the «Demon's Mouth»'s curse—Currently, it was purely akin to caloric consumption. Even so, she still accepted it as something that could not be changed. How loathsome. Naturally, all Wathes were loathsome.

"...Huff...!"

Shutting off the megaphone for now, she moved her lips away and panted hard. The old device's weight was making her wrists ache. In the first place, this was not a portable megaphone like those commonly sold on the market. It was merely a loudspeaker originally installed in the internment camp's building, forcibly modified into a megaphone that could be held in one's hand while avoiding its curse as much as possible.

In any case, in addition to the school building's interior, her earlier speech should have reached all students via the public announcement system throughout the school, including the sports ground and the gym. With that, they were going to behave according to orders the whole time. Without noticing the endless repetition, they were going to keep repeating their usual school lives and the previous period.

Although the situation was very strange, the actions themselves were no different from daily school life. Ignoring what was contradictory, forcing cognition to match memory—This was the extent of the confusion caused by the curse. In terms of suggestion difficulty, this was medium level. In other words, level of resistance was also medium. Without proper mental preparations beforehand, the students had no way of resisting.

Fortunately, suggestions issued from this «Demon's Mouth» were effective for as long as thirty hours. There was probably no need to apply additional hypnosis—As long as the "emergency moment" caused by Fear-in-Cube's faction did not arrive.

Naturally, when the time came, she intended to issue forceful commands such as "all students break nearby windows and jump out." Since this kind of order would involve survival instincts directly, it might not affect everyone, but so long as half the people actually jumped down, there would be no problem. In fact, if half the people remained, they could be used as a bargaining chip for a second time, perfect.

Using her hand to wipe drool and sweat that had dripped without her noticing, she felt dizzy. *It was as though she was suddenly about to forget what she had been doing just now.* To dispel that feeling forcefully, she deliberately puffed out her chest hard.

(Well~ Well well... I hope there were no idiots among our knights who were hit by the hypnosis just now. Apart from that, I wonder if anyone among the students and teachers successfully resisted the suggestion...?)

That being said, Taciturn had no way of confirming and could only wait for reports. In order to confirm the effects of just now's suggestion and to take care of unaffected people, a few knights who had been standing by on the sports ground had probably entered the school building and the gym by now. Even if their numbers were not enough to subjugate all students by force, only a few people were needed if it was just taking precautions against the risk factor of people unaffected by the hypnosis.

"Well, let me continue with my task."

There were more steps to complete. Although the students and teachers inside the school could follow the suggestion just now and repeat lessons as though nothing had happened, other trouble could arise as a result next.

Pressing the switch to turn on the megaphone's mic, she said the keyword to activate the taboo power again. In other words, the opening line that demon of an internment camp warden broadcasted to the captives, forcing them to listen.

'—**Hört!!**'

Her heart palpitations were getting worse. Sure enough, the strain two usages in succession was too great.

'Starting now, call home. The message is as follows—You just found out that the school is suddenly holding disaster training today, so you can't go home. To safeguard against sudden emergency situations during disasters, everyone will be staying in the gym, practicing how to use sleeping bags and open canned food. If no one picks up at home, leave a message.'

They were going to be hostages for the next twenty-four hours. If children (or husbands or wives) failed to return home and one or two family members ran to school to check things out, it would still be fine, but if a huge crowd rushed to school because parents were worrying "did something happen to the entire school?", it would be bothersome. Even if the police and the media could be suppressed.

Putting aside whether this lie was convincing or not, so long as it was a plausible explanation overall, Taciturn believed it ought to hold for twenty-four hours. Even if some parents got suspicious, as long as it was not the entire parent body taking action, it would be fine.

"Phew..."

Taciturn exhaled deeply. It was finally over.

"What remains... is broadcasting in the staff room or at a few key locations, to order teachers to phone various student families so as to reinforce credibility. I also need to devise responses beforehand for cases when people call the school to complain 'this is so incomprehensible'~"

If some parents still remained unconvinced, would they really rush over to scream and yell? Then there was no helping it, while pitying their lack of good fortune, they would have to be eliminated by force... However, were there really any family who would take so much initiative? This was quite doubtful. In any case, all explanations will place the blame on Sekaibashi Gabriel, hence Taciturn believed that the families might accept unexpectedly readily, even replying: "Oh, it's that whimsical superintendent doing something weird again... Can't be helped."

"Then again, this additional hypnosis can wait until I recover my energy first. I need to take a breather now..."

While confirming her subsequent plans, Taciturn slowly sat down on the spot.

She kept breathing deeply, patiently waiting for her utterly exhausted stamina and mental energy to return.

Despite feeling a powerful urge to all home, she managed to suppress the impulse.

Part 5

Cautiously and even more cautiously, Un Izoey checked out the surrounding situation—Finally, she made her decision and moved her hands from covering her ears. In the next instant, the students' overlapping conversations shook her eardrums.

"Ah, hello? It's me~ I'm telling you, today—"

"Umm, there's apparently disaster training today at school—"

"We will be staying overnight in the gym. Huh? Dinner? It's also part of the simulation. I think there'll be canned food."

"Feels just like camp. Anyway, I'll be staying in school today and won't come home, yeah."

"Uh, even if you say that, after all, this is a school event..."

After taking out their cellphones all at once, everyone talked on their respective phone. Whether boys or girls, even the teacher, everyone was doing the same thing. They were totally unaware how bizarre this scene looked, their faces nonchalant as though this was perfectly natural, speaking into their phones.

Disaster training? What were they talking about?

Just as Un Izoey frowned—

"Weird~? Why is everybody suddenly making phonecalls? Say, what's this about a disaster simulation?"

Only then did Un Izoey notice the classmate held in her embrace, Miyama Kana. Staring in surprise, Kana was looking up at the noise in the classroom.

Un Izoey gazed into her eyes intently.

"My question: is this activity of disaster training known to you? I confirm by making this kind of confirmation."

"Eh? You're asking if I knew about this? No no no, it's my first time hearing about it~ Oh, but I think there was an announcement just now, so they might have mentioned it. By the way, Un-chan, why did you suddenly hug me?"

Un Izoey ignored the question.

"Even so, to think everyone would make phone calls together with such perfect timing, I can only say: very weird. To engage in a strange activity previously unheard of at such a timing, with everyone accepting readily too and calling home—Is this even possible?"

"Hmm... I do find it a bit weird."

"Also... They're no longer concerned about the people in the sports ground at all. Not even one person is showing curiosity. Really, this must be—"

At this moment, Un Izoey felt warm sweat dripping down her back.

Apparently, the poisonous snake quietly approaching her neck earlier had left without sinking its fangs into her—Conversely, it had already injected its venom into the other students.

She recalled the terrifying and despairing chill from back then, causing her body to spring into action as a result. Just by hearing the announcer's voice, her entire body was filled with a sense of crisis. Instinct had saved her. Even she could not help but feel impressed that she was still able to take action.

(Curses come in myriad forms. Naturally, there also exist curses that use *sound* as a medium... I think I recall the Lab Chief mentioning this before. Did my brain memorize this sentence?)

She could not recall if he had said it while researching and lecturing, or during one of those usual chats. But since this knowledge came in handy now, it meant that it was absolutely not meaningless chatter.

Nothing less expected of the Lab Chief. She immediately corrected her opinion of him which had been trending downwards recently on the respect front. At this moment, someone tugged her uniform hem lightly.

"Uh, umm, Un-chan, it's a little embarrassing with you hugging me nonstop, can I stand up now~? On the other hand, compared to me, the other side has an even more serious problem."

Speaking of which—Un Izoey recalled another person's existence.

Opposite to Kana who was hugged by her left arm—In other words, the other classmate pinned to her right chest. After she relaxed her arm, he awkwardly lifted his nose up from her chest.

"Ehhh? Oh~ So soft—What? Oh right, phone call... Yeah, phone call...? Disaster training... Phone call... Uh, what phone call...?"

Taizou's eyes were glazed over and unfocused while he rummaged his pockets in search of his cellphone. Unlike the surrounding students, he was particularly sluggish and felt quite unsteady. Like swaying or perhaps tilting slowly like a set of scales.

Effectiveness aside, it was worth testing out at least, right? Thinking that, Un Izoey proceeded to—

"..."

Without saying a word, she slapped him. Furthermore, it was at full strength and maximum speed.

Smack! The crisp sound reverberated throughout the classroom.

"Wow~! Hmm, now that I think about it, getting slapped is only natural after burying your face in a girl's chest! I fully support Un-chan! Good job!"

Kana seemed to be approving of her actions out of entirely different assumptions, clenching her fist with excitement on her face.

So, what about the result? Un Izoey looked at Taizou.

"Gwah, ouch! What the heck, what happened?"

"...Who are you trying to phone?"

"Huh? What phone call? What's with this pain, did a bee sting me? Will I die?"

"Do you have any recollection of the words: disaster training?"

"Maybe... I heard it... No, probably not...? Gimme a hint, a hint!"

"Hey, Taichi! Before that, apologize to Un-chan first! I am now the defender of maidens! Hurry and mumble your apologies, do it quick!"

"Ehhh! My cheek really hurts. I thought you were worried about me but you're actually angry? Why!?"

Un Izoey exhaled "phew." This was his usual self. Probably because his ears were not covered fully, the curse had affected him halfway just now.

(Curse... Cursed words. A Wathe whose forbidden power brainwashes or hypnotizes? Quite powerful too.)

If all it took was for targets to hear the voice, its ease of use would be hard to quantify. It was even more astounding that its effects took hold even when heard indirectly, like through the announcement earlier. Its range could be extended arbitrarily. However—

(Like for us, it doesn't work on people who failed to hear it. Even if someone listened to it partially, a shock can force a recovery—While powerful, this cursed ability also has many weaknesses.)

That being said—Un Izoey surveyed her surroundings in the classroom while getting on her feet. Kana and Taizou also stood up with puzzled faces.

The bell happened to ring right at this moment. This was originally the bell to announce the end of the fifth period, but the surrounding students did not seem

quite concerned. Some of them continued talking on the phone while others finished their calls. Those who had finished making calls began to behave normally as they should after class. This could definitely be called a change.

"Like I said~ Yeah, that's it."

"No no, lemme explain again, 'kay? Oh~ Sure. Uh, disaster training is..."

"Great! So, what's next period? Math?"

"Excuse me~ Can I borrow a mirror for a bit~?"

The people who had finished their calls were mixed among the people still phoning home. The normal atmosphere after a lesson was spreading further. However, everyone was the same, no longer concerned with the Knights Dominion people on the sports ground—

Apart from these two classmates by her side, whom she had involuntarily reached out to save.

"Eh? Next period should be Classical Japanese, right? We just had Math."

"By the way, has the mystery of what's going on outside been cleared up~? Oh, looks like the tents are about to be done."

Un Izoey rapidly spun her mind. Taizou had recovered his sense of self most likely because the curse had only hit him partially. She did not believe that a slap would bring the other students back to their senses, given how naturally they were following the hypnotic suggestion. Although slapping was still worth a try, given the situation at hand, it was not a priority.

(Making the suggestion as close to reality as possible, is it to minimize labor? Hypnotized to ignore the sight of the Knights Dominion. Intent to maintain this state for a long period of time. Reason being—)

She immediately reached the answer.

The activated «Dieu le veut», the people who would most likely end up as the most threatening interlopers, this place near them, and the twenty-four hours of buffer time.

—Naturally, it was for turning them into hostages.

"...!"

Un Izoey secretly clenched her fist and tensed the muscles in her thighs.

Right now, the hypnotic suggestion applied to the students was still passive in content, but it was anyone's guess how things would develop next. Perhaps they might be ordered to jump off the roof later. A most terrible situation. The fates of all the students in the school were under the Knights Dominion's control.

(There should be limits to unscrupulousness...!)

She felt an unpleasant feeling surge from the depths of her heart. What this feeling should be called was still unknown. Anger? Sense of justice? Perhaps, or it could be some other emotion different from these two. Turning it into something properly known would take time, hence she decided to shelve it for now. Currently, she had to turn some other unknown into a known.

Very simply—What should she do next?

Right now, there were still other students using cellphones. But no one knew what might happen next. This was probably the only chance to do it while mixed among the others.

Un Izoey took out from her pocket the cellphone that she had finally gotten used to operating recently, then dialed hastily. Naturally, she was calling the person whom she needed to report her current unusual situation with top priority, to rely on his instructions as well.

The power of knowledge. The person who desired knowledge more than anyone else. In other words, the one most suitable to handling the current situation that was filled with unknowns.

'Hello, how are you~? I am the Yamimagari Pakuaki you wanted to find.'

"Lab Chief, emergency situation."

'This is already known.'

It felt like he was grinning on the other side of the line.

'However, what is known to me is merely superficial news from the outside. A report from you on the inside is what's truly valuable. Tell me... Oh, since it's not guaranteed how long they'll allow you guys to contact the outside world freely, best make it as quick as possible.'

"Yes. Then—"

Just as she was about to continue speaking to the cellphone—

Out of the corner of her eye, she accidentally saw. She accidentally remembered. The existence of those two people.

"By the way, everyone really seems to be getting ready for Math class... Seriously? Are we seriously having Math twice in a row? What happened?"

"No way! I was planning to catch up on sleep during Ancient Japanese class—!"

"Ahaha~ Taizou and Kana, no matter how much you hate Math, you can't just skip it, right?"

"I see now, you two are planning to infect the whole class with this kind of thought, then everybody will prepare their Ancient Japanese books and wait for the teacher to arrive! Then the Math teacher will get caught up, say: 'Did I remember wrong?' and leave—You wish! Even if he leaves, he'll come back soon!"

"Eh? Uh, but I wasn't joking. I never do this kind of comedy routine where people first play along and then pop out the punchline... Right...?"

"Sigh, Taichi... Don't you find everyone acting a bit weird...? What's everybody talking about...? Eh? Or are we the weird ones instead...?"

By this point, Kana and Taziou finally seemed to notice that something was not right.

The strange behavior of the surrounding students.

The strange atmosphere shrouding the entire school.

The strange people who appeared on the sports ground, strutting around school as though they owned the place—

"..."

Un Izoey hesitated for only an instant. She was probably responsible. Although it was her body that had moved on its own, she was responsible for saving these two.

Pressing her cellphone against her ear, Un Izoey glanced out the window. It was just the students who had stopped paying attention, but the scene in the sports ground had not changed at all. Instead, things were progressing as the enemy hoped. The erected tents, the drawn-out barbed wire, as well as the knights walking towards the school building with tense expressions while staying vigilant of their surroundings—

Suppose the Knights Dominion were to find students who were not hypnotized and still remained sane, what would happen? No need to think, surely that scene would not be anything happy.

In that case—No helping it, she had no choice.

"My judgment: guessing that we will be trapped here unless action is taken before class starts..."

"Woah!?"

"What what—!?"

"I will explain later, anyway, come with me first."

Keeping her cellphone against her ear, Un Izoey pushed Kana and Taizou's backs with her arms, forcing them walk.

They must leave the classroom first to find a hiding place. Once it was safe, then she would explain to them.

Explain what? Naturally, a certain unknown that the two of them wanted to find out.

Un Izoey only understood vaguely that this was no easy task and sighed in front of her. Then she spoke to the cellphone that must have transmitted her sigh to the other side:

"—Sorry. I am busy on this side too, so I will talk while moving around."

'Oh my~ Looks like things are getting really interesting.'

Even in this kind of situation, his voice still sounded a bit flippant from the receiver.

She could no longer suppress a tone of sarcasm in her reply:

"Yes. I am very sorry for enjoying all this on my own. I confess this kind of confession. So... If you say you want to switch places with me, Lab Chief, I will gladly switch any time. Please tell me how to pass you the baton."

Part 6

'In any case, this what the school has become. By the way, after explaining the basic situation to me, Un Izoey's call was cut off. I tried calling back many times but could not connect. Neither could I reach the cellphones of other people inside the school, so I'm afraid the Knights Dominion must have set up a signal jamming device in that vicinity. Of course, calls to the school's land line aren't going through either. Oh my oh my, they've really got things totally airtight—'

Coming from the cellphone, which had been switched to speaker phone, was Yamimagari Pakuaki's voice.

Haruaki was rendered speechless.

How unbelievable—How could anyone believe this? Impossible. It could not have happened.

However, in spite of that—

Because the situation was too serious, he could not help but understand that Yamimagari Pakuaki was not lying.

Organize them. Organize the thoughts in your mind again. Although it was not clear whether it was possible.

Simply stated, what happened?

—The Knights Dominion had occupied the school and even taken all the students hostage.

"...!"

Haruaki clenched his fists tightly, then immediately, his face became distorted. This was not only due to the unbelievable and despairing news but also due to the intense pain coming from empty part of his left hand that felt like high-voltage electric shock after he exerted forcefully. However, he desperately controlled himself and avoided moaning pathetically at least. He must not make the others worry about him again.

While Haruaki was clenching his fists, he also heard a tiny, strange noise in the living room. It sounded like metallic friction or some hard objects pushing against one another.

He turned to see Fear—still in cube form on the table—with a number of parts popping out from her body. Small components had popped out like trays with slanted corners. The opened gaps looked like cracks.

"Fear... It's time you turned back, right?"

Wanting to see her face and hear her voice, he tried asking her.

However, the cube remained silent. Several seconds later, she retracted her mechanisms back into her body with a series of clicks. That was all.

Haruaki exhaled, unable to muster more strength easily to continue persuading her.

"In other words, all the students at school today are hypnotized... Well, Taizou-kun and Miyama-san are okay, on the other hand..."

"I really don't know if we ought to thank Un-chan. To be honest, I don't even know what to feel."

'It is my hope that you won't hold her too responsible in this regard. Apparently, her body sprang into action on its own and rescued them only because they were incidentally within arm's reach.'

Indeed, Taizou and Kana.

Haruaki recalled the situation of these long-time, best friends. Completely in the dark, these two were now moving around in Un Izoey's company.

Ahhh—Clearly when the two of them had nothing to do with curses at all, why did things turn out this way? No wait, this also applied to all the students. Why were they plunged into this crisis—

The instant Konoha mentioned Taizou and Kana, Fear twisted the cube's corners with a series of mechanical sounds again. To her, these two were both classmates and best friends. She probably wanted to scream and yell loudly. And her yelling

was probably the sounds of metallic impact from her body's involuntary squirming.

Next to speak up with deathly pallor—but looking straight ahead with a firm and resolute expression—was Kirika.

"...Yamimagari Pakuaki, if you manage to contact Un Izoey again, tell her this. Although it's absolutely ridiculous, under these conditions, we can only rely on her. Tell her that for the sake of protecting Taizou and Kana... For the sake of convincing those two to follow her directions and to win their trust, she is free to say whatever she wants. Regardless what she explains to them, it is fine—Is that okay?"

Her final question was directed at Haruaki together with her gaze.

Naturally, Haruaki knew what she was implying.

What she was asking him was whether it was fine to tell Taizou and Kana everything. Curses, cursed tools, this house, them—Everything. The cursed, the uncursed, the non-humans, those who want to become human, the matter of the cursed garment that could not be taken off.

As well as deceiving them all along—This fact.

Haruaki resolved himself and inhaled at the same time.

"...Yeah, it's okay."

To be honest, this was a very scary choice. He had always thought that it would be best if this day never arrived.

However, if those two were to be lost because they failed to realize how serious the situation was... This would be even more unforgivable.

Konoha and the girls also nodded. After a moment's delay, the sound of a metallic tray opening and closing was also heard as though in agreement.

'Hmm, it is totally unknown whether it's possible to contact her again. Besides, Un Izoey seems to have prepared herself to explain the truth to them to a certain extent. In any case, I will bear this in mind.'

After Pakuaki said that, more time passed—

"Also—Damn it! That's why I said the *spear* must be destroyed... In the end, their conspiracy worked! This wouldn't have happened if we had retrieved and destroyed it at the time...!"

Kirika was clenching her teeth hard, unable to hide her groans of anxiety.

"We searched the sea so thoroughly already but still failed to find it. Does that mean we fell into a certain person's trap from the very start? That said, who knows if the Commander really is the culprit."

"Yeah. Now that it's in the past, it is too late for regrets now."

Sitting in a corner of the living room, Kotetsu and Honatsu offered their comments. Then immediately, Honatsu glanced at Haruaki's cellphone.

"By the way, Pakuaki-kun, I'd like you to explain in detail one more time."

'Explain what?'

"The Knights Dominion's objective in taking over the school. I already know about «Dieu le veut», the Nation Founding Flag Spear of the Crusaders, which acts as the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion's backbone and was used to create their headquarters in England. Then just now, you mentioned that their current objective is bringing one of the spears to create 'a new and additional Knights Dominion' in this town. What I want to know is what happens after that. If this town were to become a 'second Knights Dominion,' *what would occur specifically?*"

'I didn't explain it? Hahaha, very well, since it's the answer to an unknown sought by the infamous Yachi Honatsu, after all. It is truly a hedonistic joy for me to elucidate the unknown for you as the Lab Chief—'

"Make it quick."

Honatsu half-narrowed his eyes and interrupted. Even through the cellphone, one could tell that Pakuaki was shrugging on the other side.

Then—Pakuaki continued to explain. In other words, he explained the changes that would occur after the town completely "Knight Dominionized," the same as what he reportedly told Un Izoey a few days earlier.

Effects could be divided into two categories.

One was a holy war effect on those belonging to the Knights Dominion. After all, having acquired the meaning of "the land existing for their sake," the land naturally confers even more advantages to them. Simply stated, those belonging to the organization would have their abilities augmented. Simple to an annoying degree.

The other type was—

'Standing in contrast to the first type of change, but of course, this is only natural too. You can also call it a secondary outcome... By the way, Kirika should already know about this from that Knight Dominion girl, right? That's why you tried so desperately to destroy that *spear*, didn't you?"

"...!"

Kirika suddenly gasped, frowned hard and looked down. As though trying to calm her heartbeat, as though scolding her quickened breathing, she clenched the front of her shirt forcefully, to the point of creasing it.

"Class Rep..."

Haruaki recalled the way she looked back when they first rescued her from Sleif.

Back then, she was consumed by total despair, even to the point of wanting to give up her own life. She was single-mindedly praying for a certain task, undertaken using her fresh blood, to stop as soon as possible. After being rescued

from Sleif's hands—She had kept silent as though speaking of that matter would be akin to a curse. All she was willing to say was that the *spear* must absolutely be destroyed.

A certain incident had forced her to do that, leaving her with no choice but to do that.

A certain incident induced such total despair *that she did not even want to tell them of its existence.*

Kirika made painful breathing noises. Her gaze wandered. Her lips trembled.

It was unknown whether her brother knew of her suffering, but—

He announced very simply:

'Hmm, fine, I'll explain it. After this town acquires the meaning of "the land existing for their sake," naturally, the secondary outcome produced is that the town's original meaning will be overwritten.'

"What does... that mean?"

Haruaki could not figure it out. In response to his question, a jeering kind of giggling came from Pakuaki's throat.

'They intend to turn this town into 'land most suited to destroying Wathes.' On this kind of land—*Do you really think a site of sacred ground, capable of lifting curses, can still continue to exist?*'

Hearing that, Haruaki felt that everyone understood.

Konoha looked into the garden. As though comprehending something, Kuroe closed her eyes. Kirika forcefully took a deep breath. A number of outer frames on Fear's cube, no, dozens of outer frames popped out all at once—

Then as though losing their senses, they remained silent and unmoving.

Haruaki stared blankly up at the ceiling. This ceiling had always existed, from the very day he was born.

This fact—Perhaps it too might change.

"...Pops."

He called out quietly. His lips moved on their own. Even he himself did not know why.

But no answer. Perhaps the father, who was a woman in appearance, did not hear him. Simply staring into the distance as though his gaze could penetrate, his head was bowed towards the tatami floor where he was sitting with calves folded against the sides of his thighs.

"Hmm... Yeah, I've noticed it too. Very faint, it's really very faint... But it's changing. A certain massive underground flow is currently changing—At this rate, this ground's property of gathering purification energy will be overwritten. That's what's going on..."

"Pops!"

Now, Honatsu finally looked at him and smiled faintly with relaxed cheeks.

"Why are you making that kind of face?"

What kind of face was he making? Haruaki had no way of knowing. Conversely, what kind of face should he be making? He did not know either.

This home.

Where he had lived all his life so far. Where he had lived together with Fear, Konoha and Kuroe so far.

Where Kirika, Taizou and Kana, as well as other friends had visited many times.

Undoubtedly the place of shelter where he belonged, the most calming place in the world, the location where he matter-of-factly believed he would keep staying forever, this home—

This home might end up different from the way it was. After hearing something like this—

What sort... of face should he be making?

"...There is no way I can say 'don't worry' to you all."

As though noticing something from Haruaki's expression, Honatsu spoke calmly.

Hearing these words, which pushed him into the abyss, Haruaki felt his entire body lose balance.

Ahhh, sure enough. It's true. That kind of thing... really could happen.

After hearing such frightening news, he was finally hit by a sense of reality that had not accompanied his initial comprehension. Now that he finally understood that this was reality, his back could not help but tremble in terror. Subconsciously, a hoarse voice leaked out of his throat.

"If those guys achieves 'Knights Dominionization'... It means that what this house possesses, its meaning as sacred ground capable of lifting curses, will disappear...? This sort of thing... How can it be allowed? It must not be allowed—!"

Filled with anxiety, his blood rushed throughout his entire body. His heart rate sped up while unpleasant cold sweat broke out. He felt waves of sharp pain coming from his left hand's injury.

Then gritting his teeth hard, when Haruaki looked up—

He noticed his father smiling unfazed with a raised finger.

"Yes, of course it can't be allowed. So—in order to make everyone 'don't worry,' we have to take action next, right?"

"Ah..."

Take action. Right. Well said.

He could not help but admit, the current situation was absolutely terrible. The Knights Dominion had occupied the school. Their objective was to establish a new Knights Dominion on this land. This also meant that this home would stop being what it used to be.

However—That was the future, not the present.

His mind had halted due to the excessively shocking nature of Pakuaki's news. Thanks to his father making a matter-of-fact suggestion in a matter-of-fact manner, Haruaki's thoughts finally caught up.

"Yeah, Haru and Honatsuan are right. Of course, this can't be allowed to happen. So, let's think about why it can't happen. If this home is no longer sacred ground for lifting curses... Specifically, what will it turn into?"

She was probably trying to organize her thoughts and calm down. Nodding lightly, Kuroe murmured to herself:

"Positive thoughts can neutralize the negative thoughts such as curses. Currently, even without doing anything, positive thoughts will gather naturally in this home due to the landscape, right? This place is like a power spot. But if this place 'is no longer what it was'—"

Kuroe glanced at the accessory dwelling's storeroom and continued in a calm tone of voice:

"Consider those lightly cursed tools Honatsuan had gathered, currently kept in the storeroom, for example. The current solution of leaving them alone won't work ever again—In other words, if they're left unattended, their curses won't ever be lifted."

"...The same applies to us. Although we also have the option of actively receiving positive thoughts, such as by doing helpful favors for humans, we can't spend all

our time helping others day in and day out. The natural effect in this home—for our curses, is extremely precious energy that we must rely on."

Konoha lifted her glasses lightly and chimed in.

'Fufu, so this is like the proverb, dripping water penetrates rock? Even metal that cannot be dissolved by chemical reagents, if you drip water on it for years and months, a hole can be opened up. No matter how weak, as long as there is a definite effect—'

Ignoring the voice from the telephone matter-of-factly, Konoha looked at Haruaki and said:

"The reason I brought up just now was coming from myself as Muramasa, the cursed Japanese sword."

"...?"

"Next—speaking as Muramasa Konoha."

She slowly got up from the tatami floor and walked to the veranda. Gazing at the pillar on the veranda, she caressed it gently with her fingertips.

"Even if the ground's meaning disappears, this home won't vanish immediately, will it? However—I believe that, indeed, everything can't remain the same as before. Whether the situation, standpoint, or reason, everything will change beyond our ability to stop it. It is also possible that we won't be able to live here again..."

Of course that won't happen—As much as Haruaki wanted to, he could not muster a rebuttal. Having lost its purpose, lost its meaning, a house remaining inside the enemy camp. No one knew if they would still be able to keep living here.

"In other words—A certain connection would be decisively severed when the moment arrives. Despite the fact that clearly so many many memories... have been branded deeply in this home."

She suddenly stopped the movement of her fingers. Her shoulder shook slightly.

"Aha, got it. I remember this dates back to the middle school entrance ceremony, right? Although you insisted you were too old to have your height recorded on a pillar, I measured your height through coercion. Haruaki-kun, you were in a rebellious phase back then and kept grumbling so much..."

With her back to the group, she seemed to be looking out into the garden. Her shortened hair was fluttering lightly at her neck. Like whispering, like singing, she said:

"That tree, I climbed it, Haruaki-kun also climbed it, then we fell down together gently. We also gathered fallen leaves together to roast sweet potatoes. I also went through a phase of hating that accessory dwelling, but I don't mind it anymore. After all, just the sight of Haruaki-kun through the window made me very happy already. Whether the sink or the wall that was used as a target board. Indeed, everything is so clear when seen from here, really, including every blade of grass."

Then Konoha looked back.

"This place—is filled with the history of my falling in love with Haruaki-kun."

"Ah..."

Seeing her smile, Haruaki felt very embarrassed. The depths of his chest immediately became hot.

However, he did not look away. She did not avert her gaze either.

Smiling, her eyes started conveying fierce determination at some point.

"Hence—I, Muramasa Konoha who loves Haruaki-kun very much, does not wish for this home to be changed by others. I absolutely forbid others from wanting to change this home."

Finishing in one breath, she asked in return:

"Then... what about you, Haruaki-kun?"



Haruaki decided to follow her lead. In other words, he smiled—

"—I feel the same way. This is no joking matter."

He committed his resolve.

...To carve upon the depths of his soul that which must not be forgotten.

The home where he was born and raised—This land definitely belonged to more than just himself. Hence, he must not allow it to be taken away so easily. He must not give up easily.

"I said before... You girls can stay here forever. I won't let these words become a lie."

"Yes."

Konoha partially closed her eyes and nodded happily.

"I absolutely cannot accept the utterly terrible kind of future where I cannot live here ever again. I won't let things go their way... We must find a way to stop them."

Haruaki clenched his fist that was not holding the cellphone. In other words, the left fist with the missing fingers.

Indeed, they must be stopped. There was no choice but to stop them. At all costs.

He already understood the enemy's objective, as well as the worst outcome.

Precisely because he understood, it was true that his heart was starting to be constricted by the invisible chain called foreboding. A heavy sense of unease and suffocation. As soon as he lowered his guard, a chill would rise up his spine.

But forget it. He clenched his fist hard. Forget it. Clearly action must start now. Unless he forgot these things, nothing could begin.

However, that incomplete fist was still inhabited by a numbing sense of pain and dissonance.

No matter how much force he exerted, it still felt as though something would flow out from there into space.

Naturally—This was something else he ought to try hard to forget.

Kirika sighed and shrugged greatly.

"Sorry... You're right. They haven't achieved their objective completely yet... Dwelling on the worst possible scenario won't help at all."

"Yeah, Class Rep. It's not too late yet."

Kirika glanced at Haruaki's cellphone.

"Yamimagari Pakuaki, I will confirm the explanation you just gave... Although «Dieu le veut» has activated, its forbidden power of 'territorialization' has not taken complete effect. Time is required for that, so we still have a buffer period of twenty-four hours. Is that correct?"

'Looks like I should feel really proud of my little sister's memory. Well, to be precise, I'm thinking less than a thousand four hundred and forty minutes, but pretty much.'

"Twenty-four hours..."

Haruaki looked up at the living room clock. According to Un Izoey's report, the Knights Dominion had shown up at school during fifth period. A rough estimate—

"Until roughly 2pm tomorrow huh...?"

"Hmm, there might be a bit of additional stoppage time, but at least we're certain it's safe until then. In other words, the deadline is 2pm~"

"But of course, we can't stand around doing nothing until then. As long as we find a way to destroy the spear inside the school, the territorialization will be broken, right? Anyway, let's head over there for a look first—"

"Hold on, Yachi, don't forget about the hostages. Although there's a time limit, we must act with prudence..."

Just as everybody started giving their opinions—

Sitting on the table, spacing out, the cube finally became active again. As though regaining her senses but still filled with anxiety inside, frantically moving her mechanisms in a clatter, trying to retract the components that had popped out earlier, but halfway in the retraction process, metallic collisions were hard. It made Haruaki picture Fear originally wanting to say something but could not find words, leaving her no choice but to open and close her mouth.

Someone could be heard sighing. It was Konoha.

"Oh right, Haruaki-kun. Before we decide on our next move, I remembered there is something that needs to be taken care of first."

Konoha had just returned to the living room and taken a seat at her original spot, but then she stood up again as though she recalled something. Was she going to brew another pot of tea? She was smiling tenderly.

Then her skirt suddenly fluttered up—

Raising her foot, she kicked the steel cube on the table as hard as she could, sending it flying.

A completely merciless roundhouse kick. A loud noise of two metallic objects colliding. The cube rolled all the way to the veranda.

Jaws dropped for everyone present.

By the time Haruaki came back to his senses, Konoha had already strode over and stepped on the cube that had rolled to the veranda, pressing her entire weight on it. Unburdened by conscience at all, she trampled the cube with disdain.

"Mine original intention was to ignore—But verily, 'tis too much of an eyesore."

Cold words. Narrowed eyes beneath those glasses. She was completely in her merciless battle mode. Kotetsu instantly looked at Konoha in rapturous idolization, but she did not respond. Instead, she stepped on the cube consecutively for a number of times with her heel.

"U-Umm... Konoha...?"

"Excuse me, Haruaki-kun, but could you remain quiet for a moment? This is a matter between girls."

Konoha turned her head back and smiled sweetly again, but continued to shift her center of gravity to her leg. Haruaki's back kept trembling.

"Ha—Uselessly large and solid, producing noises nonstop like extremely clumsy lovemaking, who on earth do you think you are? You are an affront to both eyes and ears, truly a sight none could bear any longer, box... Hey, say something, okay? You ought to be capable of speaking even in this form, right? Speak, speak, speak!"

Merciless, Konoha even went as far as to kick fiercely like playing soccer. Wasn't this going overboard? Haruaki straightened his back but instantly, Konoha looked back at him. For some reason, he found his body unable to move.

Immediately—

"Stop... it..."

Fear's voice was finally heard. Although still in cube form. Like the way Konoha spoke when transformed into a Japanese sword, Fear's voice was produced somewhere.

Hearing that, Konoha suddenly went back to her usual tone of voice and demeanor. However, her executioner's aura and torturer's posture still remained unchanged.

"Oh my... You finally spoke? This little girl who only knows how to sulk. So... You should have something you would like to say, right? That was why you moved your body, didn't you?"

"..."

"Can't spit it out? Then allow me to speak on your behalf... You want to say that you would like to come along to school and help everyone out, right?"

Saying that, Konoha raised her foot and kicked Fear's body again. The cube spun one revolution on the floor.

Then she bent over, bringing her cold face near the block of steel.

"Aren't you being too paradoxical? You want to come along? Don't be stupid. Clearly, the way you are now—your mind is completely occupied with escapism, thinking as long as you stay a box, you won't be hurting anyone, am I wrong?"

"...!"

Fear could be heard gasping. Haruaki could also feel his own pulse throbbing intensely. He had not failed to notice. No—in fact, he already knew. He knew why she was doing this and what it meant.

"Under such circumstances, you still want to come along, how truly paradoxical. Naturally, I had no intention of letting you in the first place. Your thick-skinned shamelessness truly puts me a loss for words... I shall ask again. *After doing that sort of thing, do you still want to come along?* Oh right, yes, by the way, let me tell you in extremely~ direct terms—"

Konoha leaned forward even more, maintaining a posture like a demon about to devour its prey, legs apart and stepping on Fear's steel cube.

"If Haruaki-kun were not standing here alive right now, I would have killed you a long time ago."

Without any fervor, Konoha was speaking in her usual tone of voice. But precisely because of that, these words conveyed a sense of reality impossible to ignore, most likely reaching into Fear's ears. Konoha was serious, she could only be serious, this point should have reached Fear without a doubt.

Fear did not retort with a single word.

Konoha scoffed and said as though murmuring to herself:

"I remember the situation from the first time when someone from the Knights Dominion came to this house. Her name was Peavey Barowoi, right? In the end, you haven't made any progress since then till now, have you? Had I known things would turn out like this, I should have destroyed you earlier. Before you caused an irrevocable situation... before you harmed Haruaki-kun's body."

"Konoha! You're going way too far! It's not like Fear wanted to...!"

"...It's... okay."

Unexpectedly, Fear's voice was heard. Hoarse and feeble.

"How... is it okay...?"

"Cow Tits is... right, so... It's my fault. Everything, it's all my fault. So... I must, I should be destroyed..."

Haruaki felt his consciousness suddenly fading. The sudden rush of intense emotions was making dark spots appear in his vision. Pain was harshly branded on his consciousness. This girl was saying stuff like this again. Like a certain time in the past, like when he first met her—Saying this stupid stuff.

Was it really how Konoha described it? Had she not made any progress at all?

No. Not true, right, Fear? Impossible... This kind of thing, right—?

"...But..."

Hearing the cube use a contradictory conjunction, Konoha raised an eyebrow.

"I was just about to praise you for your decisiveness, but what do you want to say now?"

"Cow Tits... Please. Currently... Forget about me for now. I don't know what should be done, or what I should do. But—Right now... all the students in school must be saved. Save Taizou, Kana and all the rest. This home no longer being home, this must be prevented. I hope you'll... prioritize these first..."

In a helpless and vacant voice, she continued:

"If you want to destroy me, I don't care... Because, it can't be helped. But... Just everyone, just this home..."

These words were making Haruaki angry, suffer, sad, and even speechless.

Fear should know that too. But he still had to stop her, he thought.

Konoha too—With vibes of "an eye for an eye," she had narrowed her eyes in displeasure under her glasses.

"Yes, that is what I intend to do. This is simply because you look absolutely pathetic—and also because it is time for actual action—I was thinking I should inform you of my thoughts before that. I did mention just now that I have no intention of taking you anywhere, of course. Before leaving the house, should I throw you into the storeroom's basement? If doing that would be treating you too well, perhaps I should simply dig a hole in the yard right now and bury you..."

With perfect timing, just as Konoha swung her arm lightly to gesture towards the garden—

The ground in front of her arm suddenly blew up in a cloud of dust and dirt.

"What!?"

Haruaki blinked. Konoha pursed her lips in surprise and turned to face the garden. Just as indicated by her wary expression and action, the phenomenon was not her doing.

However, there was a part of what she said which could explain why this phenomenon had occurred.

"And also because it is time for actual action."

Indeed, these words applied to others apart from themselves—

'Oh~ Actually, I've been left out of the loop for a while now, so it felt kind of boring, like you guys had forgotten me. I was just wondering what to do... But judging from the sound, did something interesting just happen? If possible, please provide live commentary.'

"Sorry, it's impossible to talk on the phone right now. I'm hanging up."

Using the tip of his finger to press the button, Haruaki hung up the phone that he had been forced to hold in his hand the whole time. Speaking of which, why had Pakuaki provided them with all this information? Although this concern was surfacing in his thoughts, he could only shove it into a back corner of his mind. He had no choice.

Because more pressing than this concern—There was a problem that had to be handled with top priority. It had appeared right before their eyes.

Truly, an extremely simple and clear problem, one which did not contain the slightest unknown element that Pakuaki loved so much.

At the spot where Konoha had gestured with her arm, in other words, the center of the garden—

Six people were currently standing there in a line, fully armed. No matter how you looked at it, they could only be members of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion.

Part 7

It was midsummer but these people were dressed in plain-looking long coats of gray. Faint glimpses of their equipment underneath showed thicker armor than what Sleif was wearing. It looked quite heavy and solid—Indeed, hence—

When they jumped over the wall surrounding this house all at once and landed at the same time, no wonder dust and dirt flew into the air as though there was an explosion.

"..."

Most likely in consideration of ease of movement, their heads were not covered up in any way. Ethnicity, age and gender all varied among these six people. There were men and women, young and old, Caucasians and blacks.

Needless to say, what they all shared was—

Burning in their eyes, hatred and hostility for Wathes.

"Fear-in-Cube, demon sword Muramasa, Nagasone Kotetsu Nyuudou Okisato—wretched blades knowing of nothing except human harm."

"Ningyouhara Kuroe, «Gimestorante's Love»—Harmful evidence of natural order's disruption."

"Yachi Honatsu, Yachi Haruaki... Sinners who affirmed and accepted these Wathes."

"You are all top enemies of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion! Prepare to die now!"

"First commando unit of the 90th Knight Squad—All members, draw your swords!"

Under the command of the Caucasian man who appeared to be their leader, the knights took out their weapons from beneath their long coats at the same time. All of them were using swords but unlike their equipment, these swords all differed in appearance. Claymores, one-handed swords, curved blades that were so twisted in shape that they did not resemble swords, as well as short swords resembling fruit knives. Among them—there were probably cursed tools. Especially during the instant of drawing their blades, someone glared at their weapon in contempt, others had twitching faces while enduring the urge to vomit, still others pierced their palm to let their sword suck blood, it was all too certain.

Just as Haruaki's body froze, two gusts of wind blew past him, left and right.

"Kotetsu, assist me!"

"Yes!"

Literally with vigor like unsheathing swords, Konoha and Kotetsu rushed into the garden from the veranda, engaging the charging knights in combat—With knife hand and tiger claw stances, their blades clashed with the knights' swords with metallic noise.

The enemies did not falter in courage. Shouting vigorously, they kept advancing, swinging their wielded swords. They were definitely no small fry, judging from their movements. None of them showed any openings. Their fighting style did not follow any fixed formation, giving off an impression that they were advancing independently towards a common goal. Naturally—This was the only goal of destroying cursed tools.

Most likely, they were not ordinary pawns. Each of them was a proud and powerful knight. Like Peavey Barowoi. Like Neto the Avenger. Like Lilyhowell Kilmister.

"Kuh... Ha, quite amazing! My blood is beginning to boil!"

"Boiling is fine but do not get careless! Also, they are...!"

Despite Konoha and Kotetsu's efforts to go all out from the start, they were still unable to thwart the enemy's zeal so easily. Konoha frowned and could not help but groan.

"So strong...! Naturally, their swordsmanship is strong, but it feels that overall, their bodily strength as well—"

Probably recalling something, Konoha closed her mouth in a sudden realization. At the same time, Haruaki also realized.

What Pakuaki mentioned. A holy war effect. A power augmentation effect.

Indeed, this town *had started* to "Knight Dominionize." The process still had yet to finish, that was all.

"Knights Dominionization" probably brought more than bodily changes that could be seen clearly with the naked eye. Invisible mental strength and willpower, as well as physiological values inside the body that were impossible to measure in the first place, all sorts of factors had been strengthened—That was the feeling Haruaki got. Thinking calmly, he concluded that the extraordinary feat of jumping over the wall while wearing heavy armor was probably thanks to the holy war effect's benefits as well.

Also—There was also disparity in numbers.

Konoha was handling three while Kotetsu faced another three as well, but at this moment, one knight broke off from each of the fights and approached the veranda. Probably due to some kind of cursed power, they were shimmering like mirages in front of Konoha and Kotetsu, allowing their wavering bodies to pass through the blockade. It was impossible to defend no matter how hard they concentrated.

Konoha bit her lip and tried to turn around, but the two remaining knights prevented her from doing as she wanted. Kotetsu was in a similar situation. Things were starting to get chaotic.

"Haru, stand back!"

"«Black River»... Is not here! Damn it, how absolutely ridiculous!"

Kirika groaned. Putting her full effort in controlling her hair, Kuroe prevented the two knights from advancing.

Haruaki looked at the steel cube that had rolled to the veranda. Making noises, the cube shook its surface, looking like she was closing her eyes, covering her ears, shuddering with knees drawn up to her chest.

"Anyway...!"

Even if Fear was currently like this, the knights were probably not going to let her go. Haruaki used his body to push Fear back into the living room. They must get farther away—

"Haru!"

"Woah!?"

Hearing Kuroe's acute scream, Haruaki turned his head, only to see a certain object closing in before his eyes. He fell backwards on his bottom. The instant he ducked down, a knight's extended sword swept over his head like a whip. Making an earsplitting impact, this strike sliced off a large piece of the veranda pillar. The whole house seemed to make a creaking sound.

Kuroe's hardened hair caught up to that knight and stopped the second attack in the nick of time. Kirika threw hot tea to pin down the other guy's movements.

Haruaki bit his lip and switched to using his back to push Fear. He looked up at the damaged house. The pillar with a large chunk sliced off. What Konoha had gazed upon with a gentle gaze just earlier, one of this home's precious memories—Had been destroyed.

Ah, but that was only because he had not noticed until now. This type of destruction had started all over the place a while ago.

On the veranda, Kuroe's hair and the knights' swords kept clashing and bouncing repeatedly. As a result, the warm floorboards were damaged, cut open, trampled by the shoes they were wearing.

From her vantage point in the garden, Konoha narrowed her eyes as though unable to bear the sight. The great tree ahead, filled with memories, had its branches violently chopped off, the remains scattered all over the ground. It was probably the aftermath from clashes between the knights' swords and Konoha's knifehand or simply because they had used the branches as footholds and shields.

Kotetsu was sent flying high, smashing into the second floor window of the accessory dwelling. This was Konoha's room in the past. Shattering all over the place, the glass gave off an earsplitting sound. However, Kotetsu immediately looked out from the window with a frown. Slicing up the dangling and distorted window frame as though it was a nuisance, he jumped outside the house again. To intercept him, a knight threw a rock from below. After Kotetsu deflected it with a tiger claw, this time, the adjacent window was smashed into smithereens. Kuroe sighed in resignation.

That was not all. The ground in the garden was getting dug up together with the grass. The laundry rack was slanted, tragically broken. The boundary wall was heavily scarred. The accessory dwelling's wall showed radial cracks. The sound of roof tiles breaking could even be heard overhead accompanied by a clattering as they fell.

This house, this land, this place itself—Was getting damaged.

On an unprecedented scale, with unprecedented tragedy.

It did not feel real at all. Because up until this morning—It had been the usual home.

Simply the Yachi home, the one where Haruaki had always lived and where he thought he would always continue to live.

"Haruaki-kun! You, take this and get out of my way!"

Konoha forcibly changed her movement's vector. In exchange, the knight's attack severed the tips of her shortened hair by a few centimeters. Tiny cuts also surfaced on her face. Immediately, she passed through the gaps between Kuroe's hair and returned to their side.

"Huff... Haruaki-kun, are you okay?"

"I should be the one asking if you're okay, Konoha?"

"Yes, I am fine enough. These people are showing speed and strength more powerful than what their appearances suggest, it's terrifying. Is that the so-called energy coming from within? Thanks to that, they are truly tough to handle... By the way, that tree! I can't believe they made such a mess of that tree, so full of memories! I'm so angry, I absolutely forbid them from further damaging this home—"

"...Tsk!"

Just at this moment, Kotetsu happened to be blown away by the leader he was fighting, flying towards house. Judging by his speed, unless a solution was found, let alone the living room, Kotetsu was probably going to smash all the way into the kitchen. Consequently, Kotetsu deliberately kicked at the storm shutter on the veranda without holding back at all to absorb the impact. After getting kicked, the shutter's wooden fragments even flew into the living room, leaving marks on the sliding door and the tatami floor, stabbing into the cupboard, causing the television to fall off its stand and turn into a silent heap of scrap metal.

The landing impact sent Kotetsu through the floorboards of the veranda. Using a tiger claw, he grabbed a pillar on the side tightly. Only then did he finally seem to realize something. Suddenly frozen in motion. Konoha cast her stiff voice at his back:

"Unforgivable though it may be... Ultimately, it does depend on the situation after all. Right now... Forget about it first."

"...Umm, truth be told, if you could forget what you just declared... I will... be very grateful too."

Kotetsu groaned, apparently breaking out in cold sweat. He looked like he did not have the spare energy to look behind him.

After Konoha and Kotetsu returned to the veranda, Haruaki's team regrouped. Kuroe wiped sweat off her brow with a "phew~" and allowed her hair to rest whereas Kirika gazed at her bare arm in chagrin.

Konoha and Kotetsu prepared for battle with tense nerves. The knights ahead exchanged glances while adjusting their positions, confirming one another's condition. They did not spend too much time on catching their breath—Besides, none of them were panting in the first place. Was this part of the effects of "Knights Dominionization"?

Neither hesitation nor retreat was going to happen. As though silently sharing this determination, they began to approach once again.

"The second round is about to start..."

"Individually, they are definitely inferior in strength to that woman from before—Lilyhowell Kilmister—but..."

"Hmph, I don't know if we should count our blessings that these guys are not Knight Squad Leader level... Who knows what things would be like if that woman were to become even stronger than before. That said, it's an absolutely ridiculous thought."

"—She is a traitor who abandoned her mission, driven by personal emotions. Even if she were standing here, still alive, she won't be receiving any blessing from the Dominion."

"Who would have thought you guys to be so small-minded."

Konoha retorted after listening to the Caucasian team leader while slowly retreating together with Kotetsu on the frontline—They were no longer in the veranda. Instead, they had been forced completely back into the living room.

"All of them are experts despite not reaching a Knight Squad Leader's level. Also, there is the problem of them being all here in a group... Our earlier actions were too reckless. Haruaki-kun, I shall change back into a sword first. Use me to defend yourself."

"Indeed. If Konoha-kun and the others are fighting on the frontline, it's very hard to protect Yachi. Kuroe-kun can only do so much on her own. I've already lost my means of attack... Also—"

Kirika cast an apologetic gaze in Haruaki's direction. More precisely, it was to what was behind them, the steel cube still trembling as though in a convulsion.

Was she trembling due to terror? Or indecisiveness? Or a quandary? Or fear? So long as she remained silent, no one could know for certain—But, for some reason...

Haruaki felt that he could at least be sure that her appearance was linked to the emotion of wanting to cry.

Indeed, tears. The image of her crying her heart out like a child suddenly surfaced in his mind like a wave of dizziness.

Mouth wide open, rubbing the corners of her eyes, tears falling nonstop, her crying appearance surfaced in his mind—

No, perhaps he really heard it. Perhaps he really saw it.

While a sense of pain and emptiness occupied his left hand, he seemed to hear vaguely from the depths of a dream—

"Haruaki-kun, are you listening!?"

"Uh, yeah, what's up?"

Haruaki suddenly came back to his senses and blinked. Konoha glanced at the cube behind his heels.

"Seriously... There's no time to be concerned with that piece of furniture. Listen carefully, Haruaki-kun, since the enemies are numerous, we can only retreat while fighting. Please do not strain yourself no matter what."

While speaking, she held Haruaki's hand.

"...Muramasa-sama."

At this moment, Kotetsu called out while facing forward. He sounded a bit nervous.

"This will end immediately. Although attacks will burden you somewhat, please endure."

Konoha jumped into the air while responding to Kotetsu. Haruaki felt the Japanese sword's weight in his hand.

"By this point, we have no choice but to use this house as home field advantage. In an emergency, retreat to the corridor to engage in one on one..."

"—Muramasa-sama!"

Hearing Kotetsu shout with greater emphasis, Konoha suddenly stopped talking. Then slowly, the blade rose, covered by the black scabbard... The sword's tip turned to the garden, turning to the veranda from where enemies were approaching.

There were definitely enemies in the garden, but none of the knights were in sight.

"Hmm... Numbers? Doesn't seem that many to me. See, now I'm the only one left, right? Well, I suppose there are three if you really want to count three."

Instantly, a number of crashes could be heard coming from over the roof. The acute sounds of roof tiles breaking and the screams of wooden boards cracking. A

large amount of dust came pouring down through the gaps between the boards at the top.

Following a clattering sound of sliding, everyone's gaze was drawn from the ceiling to the veranda.

Like a ball that was hanging on the edge of the roof, a knight fell from the eaves with a thud.

Naturally, the one responsible for this scene was—

"Puhoo~! What's with this guy? That movement was super amusing! Make him do it one more time!"

"Thrown away pathetically like a piece of rag, how sympathetic/ludicrous to the point that one has no choice but to rub the tips of one's breasts... Rest in peace."

The Commander of the Draconians.

Maximilian Pendragon, accompanied by his two loyal cursed tools.

Part 8

A muscular and well-built physique with perfect proportions, a head of flaming red hair, facial features exuding an air of ferocity rivaling that of an Olympic-class athlete—His entire body exuded a sense of presence that was impossible to forget after a single glance.

With a faint smile hanging on his face without any hint of mockery, he lightly shook his raised arms. Most likely, those arms had tossed the Dominion's knights away all at once, or some similar motion. Even though it was a surprise attack, this was not something any ordinary person could have done. The astounding strength and technique residing in his body was truly terrifying.

However—They all knew that already. Long ago, they had been forced to experience it already.

"Haha~ Although it sucks to be them, we're the ones who made an appointment first. I'd feel very troubled if they cut in line first."

"We don't recall... agreeing to an appointment with you."

"But I do. Do you really think I'd give up just because the ship was destroyed? My goal remains unchanged."

Then he cast his completely unwavering gaze at them and continued:

"...Ningyohara Kuroe, become mine."

He had spoken the same words this morning when he summoned them to his ship.

It was also these words that marked the situation's rapid deterioration.

Indeed—He still had not changed his mind. Truly the worst scenario.

Even if it meant going all-out, he still intended to make Kuroe assist him. He wanted her to stay by his side to serve him. In order to use her power to manipulate life force, so as to overcome what he thought to be a dragon's only weakness—the concept of *old age*.

"Good grief, absolutely ridiculous... Don't you know that a man who keeps harassing will get hated?"

"Haha~ I hope you can describe me as devoted."

Cold sweat dripped from Kirika's forehead as she spoke. Pendragon simply laughed loudly.

"Anyway, that's that, so let's continue. Oh yeah~ I really didn't expect the fight so get so intense in the second half when that girl pulled out all the stops. Never expecting the duel ship to sink, I only let you guys escape because I was surprised—Hmm?"

He tilted his head slightly, probably because he noticed Fear's appearance at the very back. Then he shrugged in dejection:

"What is this? And I was thinking there won't be any flooding if we fought here, unless the Earth gets split in half or Japan sinks in subsidence... Hmm, whatever. Let's continue."

"!"

The Japanese sword in Haruaki's hand gasped. He could feel all her muscles in nervous tension. This was to prepare for action at full strength any moment.

"I really hope you guys have the spirit to enjoy the moment more or less. Like I just said, things should be much easier in terms of numbers now, right?"

"No way. Compared to you, fighting those six people was easier."

"...Truth be told, that is precisely the case."

The Japanese swords answered, exuding an aura as though smiling with fangs bared. Regardless, the enemy's strength was already reflected upon their blades and it was impossible to dismiss with a laugh.

"Haha~ Now that I think more carefully about it, your numbers have thinned out compared to earlier on the ship, so you're in no mood to enjoy the fight? Ah, now I'm reminded. Where's Gabriel and Houjyou?"

"Your worries are unnecessary. Until reaching the shore, we were all together, then we parted ways... Now that the school is in a crisis, they are probably focused completely on that side."

It was possible they might have returned to school immediately, only to end up caught in the Knights Dominion's invasion plans. Or, they might have noticed the situation from outside and were currently devising countermeasures. Although Haruaki's group wanted to get in touch with them as soon as possible, the current situation did not allow them such a luxury, of course.

"Well then, Riko, Granaury."

"It's finally my turn! I'm so bored! You need to be more passionate, showing you need me at all times—! ...But... But whether I'll accommodate you any time, that's a totally different matter! Don't get the wrong idea!"

"Amidst the lethargy after climaxing, I was just about to quietly inquire of the regrettable/awesome truth: 'Perhaps there is no need for us to mobilize at all?'"

Same as what was witnessed on the ship—The two of them transformed.

Originally clinging to Pendragon's arm, Riko turned into full-body armor made from white components. Thick yet displaying graceful lines, the armor covered his muscular body. Although his head was left uncovered, had Riko the intention, she could probably protect his head as well.

Just as Pendragon grabbed Granaury's arm that was stuffed in her sleeve, her body vanished, resulting in some kind of weapon with a double-edged blade held in Pendragon's hand. A spear's tip. Pendragon fitted it onto Riko's armor on the back of his hand.

«Corpse Armor Rikongarowa» and the «Granaury Spear».

These were the cursed tools possessed by Draconian Commander Maximilian Pendragon and more than likely his most trusted partners too.

"Guh...!"

Faced with the fully armed Pendragon, Haruaki entered a combat stance. Such powerful pressure. Just facing off against him made Haruaki's entire body sweat.

Because—His body knew already. What kind of being he was, what kind of opponent. No, it was impossible to forget. The deadly battle against him on that ship, it had merely been several hours ago...!

But at this moment, the weight of the sword in Haruaki's hand vanished. Instead, something flesh-toned occupied his entire view.

"If this man is the only enemy—I cannot allow Haruaki-kun to stand on frontline. I have no wish of repeating the same mistake from that time. Kotetsu! We shall attack!"

"Yes! But, umm, Muramasa-sama... Your clothing..."

"No time to care about that!"

After turning back to human form, the nude Konoha charged at Pendragon with Kotetsu. Indeed, back when Haruaki was fighting on the ship while wielding the sword, he had ended up as a liability. But after Konoha changed back to a human, would it change anything?

He could only believe in change. He could only pray that she could resist him.

Pendragon began to clash intensely with Konoha and Kotetsu in the garden. Konoha and Kotetsu kept changing positions, difficult for the naked eye to follow, displaying silent coordination with perfection, swinging the swords that were their bodies. But by using Riko's armor on his hands, shoulders and legs, Pendragon easily deflected all their attacks.

Naturally, armor was used to increase defense. However, the more defense provided, the thicker the armor, which meant additional weight and reduced mobility. This was the principle. However—this principle did not apply to Riko and Pendragon. Because the components of Riko's armor could move, although it was unclear whether Riko followed her own judgment, Pendragon directed her through other methods, or the armor read the battle situation autonomously.

Only at the part blocking enemy attacks would the armor thicken instantaneously before scattering to receive the next wave of attacks. Greatly familiar with Pendragon's physical capabilities and movements, the armor predicted future movements and ensured there was sufficient space near the required joints. Hence, Riko's armor neither impeded his movements nor hindered his speed, while at the same time, providing defense and mobility.

That was not all.

Using momentum from a dash, Kotetsu swung a tiger-clawed strike with both hands together at full strength. This was an attack focused on maximum power, executed with firm belief that Konoha would divert the enemy's attention for him.

However, Pendragon chose to take a great stride towards Kotetsu instead, kicking up dirt underfoot as he twisted his waist strenuously. Riko's armor instantly gathered to form a spiked elbow for an intercepting attack—

"Guhhhhhhh!"

Kotetsu ended up bouncing back despite his running start. His face was twisted but he immediately recovered his posture and charged Pendragon again—

That armor most likely had offensive uses in addition to defense. Assisting the movements of Pendragon's body, lessening his burden while augmenting muscle strength at the same time, it was functioning like a power suit.

"Damn it! Are there no weaknesses...!?"

Haruaki could not help but groan. This comment was honestly just a slip of the tongue, but unexpectedly—

"Putting aside whether it counts as a weakness or not... Based on my observations so far, I have discovered something about that armor on that topic. That being said, it's just an absolutely ridiculous guess and by this point, probably meaningless too."

"Huh? What is it, Class Rep!?"

"Basically—"

The one who answered ended up being Pendragon himself, while continuing to fight Konoha and Kotetsu.

"I know, you're talking about Riko's curse, right? It's nothing worth hiding, so I'll go straight to the point—Come to think of it, perhaps this counts as the same type as yours? In other words, the type that brings death as soon as it is taken off."

"! ...I knew it...!"

Kirika gasped, her eyes flashing. Then she murmured:

"All things considered, it's definitely too unnatural how she sticks to him at all times even when in human form. If there was any reason why there was no choice, a curse is the most likely candidate. If armor, which causes the wearer's death as soon as it is removed, takes on human form, then the curse transforms into 'killing the owner as soon as contact with her body is lost' whenever she is humanoid...!"

"Precisely, that's why we're together all the time, whether taking a bath, going to the toilet, sleeping, or sleeping. We are already joined as one life, so there's nothing inconvenient—"

"Hey, hold on! Why did you mention sleeping twice just now! This kind of thing... Uh, umm, it's too embarrassing, don't go telling others!"

The armor wrapped around his body was yelling from somewhere. Judging from this reaction, he was most likely telling the truth. Once Riko was separated from his body, or if he took off the armor in this state—

Pendragon would die.

But even if that was true, what could they do?

Riko had already shown the armor's true powers, conferring unrivaled defense and augmented offense. Under such conditions, stripping the armor off was completely impossible. Even if this one task was all it took to slay the strongest dragon, it was far too impractical a method.

Furthermore—Riko was not the only one conferring unrivaled assistance upon him, of course.

"To be honest, I really can't bear this sight any longer! Why don't you take this opportunity to regroup and go make a handle at least!?"

"What pleasing/unpleasant words as though someone was biting my ear. However, worry not. I have lost my handle long ago in the distant past."

A spear's tip. This was the only description for Granaury who was now attached to the back of Pendragon's right hand. Were it a weapon of insufficient sharpness, Konoha's knifehand strikes would have sliced clean through the blade, but Granaury kept blocking her attacks with exceptional ease. Then as though Pendragon had extended his fist, Granaury stabbed forward.

"...!"

Konoha crossed her arms and raised them to block the blade's thrust. A heavy and earsplitting metallic noise was heard. This impact caused Konoha to slide back greatly.

"Make no mistake, I was like this to begin with."

"That's right. Once upon a time~ There was an attendant who lost his master due to an enemy's underhanded scheming. Wanting only revenge, the attendant chose the tip of his master's spear, broken by the enemy, as the weapon to sever the enemy's throat. In other words, this thing."

Pendragon swung his right hand in order to show Konoha. While blocking Kotetsu's attack at the same time, he continued explaining with an expression of composure:

"However, he felt that the master's grudge could not be conveyed properly unless the enemy was killed in melee range up close. Even the distance of a shaft felt like an obstacle. Based on this idea, the attendant did not repair the spear. Even ignoring the risk of losing his own fingers to the blade, he gripped the spear tip directly in his hand to duel the enemy. Finally succeeding in vengeance, his obsession turned into a curse... Yes, let me give a quick demonstration. Halfway is fine, Granaury."

"Affirmative."

Haruaki saw the blade, which originally extended out from the back of Pendragon's hand, retract towards his arm. In other words, the blade originally protruding over the fist was now shortened. Shortened roughly by half.

"...?"

Konoha frowned in puzzlement. That was only natural. Extending in length was obvious in utility but in close quarters combat, what meaning was there in deliberately shrinking a weapon's range of attack? Besides, it was not a blade long enough in the first place for a slight shortening to make any difference.

Using his left hand to block, Pendragon then kicked Kotetsu away and closed in on Konoha. Then jumping lightly, he swung his fist down at Konoha from midair. Konoha originally wanted to enter a defensive stance, but suddenly showed alarm on her face and chose to evade at the last moment—

In the next second, a cloud of dust flew as though the ground had exploded.

"What...!?"

Haruaki could not believe what he saw. It was not a real explosion, just that the ground had suffered an impact strong enough to call an explosion. However, this was—

The garden's soil flew all around. Even countless pebbles were launched into the living room, scattering in a clatter. Haruaki watched with his arm covering his face to find Konoha's earlier position dug up greatly with a deep hole in the ground. It was like a meteor crash.

Slowly lifting that meteor—in other words, his right fist that had punched through the ground—Pendragon said:

"Yes, that's basically it. A practical demonstration most easy to understand. Doesn't this liven up the mood?"

"This power...! Is that a curse...!?"

"I am the spear upholding righteousness and loyalty, the «Granaury Spear». A broken spear capable of close quarters combat for the sake of upholding loyalty. My master, my blade, and whom the blade ought to attack—the shorter the distance between all three, the better."

"In other words, the power of her blade increases the shorter the distance between the owner and the enemy. When attached to Riko's armor, I will adjust her length like this. Even without attaching them together, there is also a huge difference in power between holding her at the base versus holding the blade's very center."

"What about a spear's meaning as a long weapon? Its intended usage has been utterly overturned."

"Yes, that is why it's also called the «Contradictory Spear»."

Pendragon grinned and suddenly raised an eyebrow.

"Oh—But wait, now is not the time for livening up the mood to have fun. I almost forgot because it's been so long since I last used these two together in an all-out fight. However, if this is enough to make you understand my strength and give up, to become my property obediently, then it's not wasted effort—"

"Hmm~ Because it's not a very spectacular performance, I can only say 'No~ thank you~' in return."

His gaze was directed forward to the inside of the house. Kuroe replied vaguely.

Pendragon looked around with apparent exasperation.

"Really? Looks like I'd better end things quickly instead of playing around..."

"You still haven't changed your mind?"

"Of course not. I will make you mine, to become a part of my power. I've already made my decision, which will not change again—No matter what anyone says."

Then Pendragon took a step towards them.

At the same time, his entire body's aura changed. To even more of a cruel carnivorous predator than before. It was like the presence of a dragon that had just woken up to discover the existence of its rumbling stomach and the prey.

"...!"

Haruaki felt his back tremble in terror. Honestly—He was utterly scared, just from standing in front of the enemy's gaze, just from standing in front of the enemy's advancing direction. So what should they do? He could feel Kuroe nervously tensing every single hair. He could see Kirika clenching her fist tightly. A clattering could be heard overhead. Were those the pebbles that had flown from Pendragon's strike just now, rolling on the roof? It felt inexplicably noisy. *Koro koro. Kara kara. Gara gara*—Creak.

Creak?

It felt like something heavier than pebbles was making the roof creak.

Just as Haruaki wondered, this time, he heard the sound of someone clearly stepping on and breaking wood overhead—

"Maximilian Pendragon! You bastard!"

"Hey, you guys are unexpectedly durable. I didn't think I held back at all."

A gray figure leapt into the air to attack Pendragon. Not just one of them—He was immediately followed by a second, then a third. Naturally, they were all knights whom Haruaki thought Pendragon had taken out during the initial surprise attack.

The leader of the knight squad made a thrust with his heavy claymore. Pendragon instantly blocked. One knight waved a sword hazily then disappeared while another knight threw a sword from an incomprehensible angle. The rest of the knights also returned to the battlefield one after another. Even the last knight who had collapsed under the veranda was slowly getting up.

"In the end, everyone revived? Oh... Is this for real? What a nuisance."

"You are the nuisance, Commander!"

It was probably thanks to the blessings of "territorialization" that the knights were reawakening so quickly. Enhanced stamina and recovery. Although it was unclear whether their wounds healed faster as well, it would not come as a surprise either.

Granaury's blade clashed directly with a knight's sword.

"Hmph, looks like you guys have no intention of retreating. In that case... No way around it!"

"Attention, all knights, change of target priority! Eliminate the biggest belligerent threat first! Namely, «Corpse Armor Rikongarowa» and the «Granaury Spear»—Both are contemptible Wathes. There is no reason to let them go!"

The reawakened knights applied their own skills and the power of curses, which they were supposed to forsake, to maximum effect to attack Pendragon. Strengthened by the holy war effect, their bodies did not feel any fatigue or exhaustion at all.

At this time, Haruaki saw Konoha and Kotetsu exchange glances silently. Kuroe and Kirika also nodded at each other. At the same time, he also reached an answer. In other words, what they should do next.

Konoha and Kotetsu turned around simultaneously and returned to the living room. While picking up her clothes, Konoha said:

"Let us take this opportunity to escape!"

"Yeah! But where to...?"

"Yachi, let's escape this place first then decide! Seize this chance when they're currently engaged in battle!"

"I-I got it. Oh, but Fear—"

Konoha put her clothes on roughly and said impatiently:

"Honestly, just forget about her!"

"No way!"

"Here~ Haru, use this for now!"

Probably expecting this conversation ahead of time, Kuroe quickly pulled something out from the depths of the corridor. Haruaki saw the ends of her hair holding a wheeled cart for travel use. Speaking of which, there was apparently something like it in a corner of the unused room.

"O-Okay!"

Most likely due to what people call an adrenalin rush, Haruaki did not feel burdened even when carrying Fear in his arms. Carefully, he placed her on the cart—Currently, Fear's trembling was very slight, but that was not relief. It felt like she had become even more feeble.

"Oh, hey, wait up! It's a bit bad for my pride if you guys succeed in escaping twice in a row—"

Naturally, the group ignored Pendragon's shouting. Haruaki threw a brief glance at him, only to see the number of knights fighting him reduced by two. There was little time left.

Last of all, Haruaki looked at the badly damaged living room, then the ceiling, the veranda, the garden and the accessory dwelling.

In other words, his home that had never been damaged so tragically before.

Then closing his eyes forcefully, he etched this sad sight onto the back of his eyes.

This was nothing—He convinced himself. Something so minor would be restored soon enough. Definitely—Restored back to the original state.

Hence, for this purpose, right now—

"Yachi, hurry!"

Kirika pressed Fear against the cart from behind to prevent her from rolling off. Pulling the heavy cart, Haruaki ran to the corridor from the living room, then all the way to the entrance.

After putting on shoes sloppily, just as they were dashing out of the house, something creaked ominously from behind, but—

Haruaki did not look back.

After running persistently for a while...

Haruaki's group arrived at a deserted corner in the streets. To catch their breath, they finally began to slow down.

"Huff, huff..."

Haruaki wiped away sweat using the back of his hand. Drenched with sweat, his hair clung tightly to his forehead, feeling very unpleasant. Due to lack of exercise, his heart and lungs were working at maximum capacity. Probably due to improved blood circulation, he could feel his pulse throbbing intensely from the empty spot of his left hand's missing fingers. A persistent aching with a vague pain that carried heat. Still, it was already much better than the intense pain he felt instantly every time he stepped hard against the pavement.

While catching his breath, Haruaki looked up.

"So... What's the next step?"

"Yachi, putting that aside first, I just discovered something absolutely ridiculous."

"What's wrong, Class Rep?"

Kirika's face was showing unease and slight awkwardness.

"...Honatsu-san isn't here. By any chance... did we leave him behind...?"

"Ah."

Now he realized—Kirika was right. Looking around, there were no signs of the woman whose true identity was his father. Konoha also made an embarrassed look with cold sweat dripping. Only Kotetsu looked nonchalantly uninvolved, as though he was saying: "I see, he probably died. So?"

Haruaki forced himself to speak cheerfully:

"Ha, hahaha. Oh my~ Now that I think back, I think we lost sight of him ever since Pendragon appeared. He must have fled early on, so no need to worry."

Roughly 80% of these words came straight from the heart. He had never been able to predict his father's actions and way of thinking. Besides, his father had actually accomplished the feat of escaping the Knights Dominion's encirclement successfully so far. His speed in running away was not in doubt at all. No need to worry—Probably. He would be contacting them suddenly and meet up later.

"I hope... that's the case..."

"Back to the main subject, what's the next step? The initial target was..."

"We were discussing that it was about time to strike back... Although judging from our current state of fleeing for our lives, it doesn't sound very convincing."

"We only have twenty-four hours of buffer time and they even have hostages on hand. We can't let our town and that home become the Knight Dominion's possessions without doing anything—"

In that case, what needed to be done was already certain. It was like the process of elimination.

"...Let's go directly to school."

"No helping it. After all, time is running out indeed."

"Yeah, but we can't overexert ourselves. Although time is running out, it's still evening, so it's not like every second counts. We can at least make our way there slowly to allow our bodies to rest. After all, you just fought Pendragon... Also—"

Haruaki swallowed the word "Fear" back into his stomach. He could feel the weight of the cart that he was dragging behind him. The weight of her who was secured by a rope. She could not go anywhere. neither did she want to walk on her own. Simply transported by others. Like an object that had lost all will—

(Fear...)

They started walking towards the school.

The group was silent. The atmosphere was heavy. Even Kuroe, who would normally make jokes on purpose during times like these, was staring thoughtfully at her feet, simply walking forward.

Naturally, thoughts began to gravitate towards their destination. Haruaki recalled the school. What was the school like now? Originally, a school where lessons were going on as usual before the Knights Dominion arrived. Originally, an ordinary school where the flow of time was no different from usual.

Currently, what kind of unusual situation had that place been swept into?

Although they had already heard about Un Izoey's situation, that was only secondhand information obtained through Pakuaki. They were still unsure of the precise situation. Rather than dispelled, worries were increasing.

Treated as hostages, was everyone still okay? Apart from Un Izoey, seeing as it was a weekday, the other girls involved with cursed tools ought to be attending school as usual. Were they okay?

(Wrong...)

Haruaki shook his head lightly.

He knew very well. Regardless whether they knew about the secret of cursed tools or not, now that the entire school was captured, making this sort of distinction would be pointless. Rather, he should be worrying more about the ordinary students who were completely in the dark.

Because—Even though hypnosis had been used to cause errors in the students' cognition...

Even though the students had not realized they were hostages...

Even so, this kind of situation—

(It's the same as if... we got them involved. Damn it...!)

The depressing circumstances were thrashing around in his mind.

The students who were dragged into this by them must be rescued.

If the Knights Dominion's attempt could not be stopped, they were going to lose the Yachi home where they belonged.

As the strongest being, Maximilian Pendragon refused to give up on obtaining Kuroe. Empowered by "Knights Dominionization," the knights were trying to destroy them like it was their daily homework. Un Izoey, Taizou and Kana, who were unaffected by the hypnotic suggestion. The pain and sense of loss occupying his left hand's fingers. Crushed by nihilism and regret, Fear had turned back into a genuine square—

Haruaki bit his lip and deliberately quickened his pace.

There was nowhere to go but forward.

Even if the nauseating and ominous weight brought by mixing all of the current circumstances together...

...Kept trying to slow down his footsteps.

Chapter 2 - The Steel Wishing to be Powerless / "Case x Collision x Coetaneous"

Part 1

The trio of Un Izoey, Taizou and Kana were walking in the corridor with their postures slightly bent forward.

The corridor was very quiet while lessons were in progress, filled with a unique atmosphere of tension, but it was not silent. Faint lesson sounds could be heard from the adjacent classroom as well as a stammering voice reciting English. However, the mood was so tense that it felt like making a sound would be a terrible crime.

Naturally, due to other reasons, they could not make too much noise either.

"Hmm~ This really feels like Mission Impossible: Skipping Class. I'm getting addicted to this tension."

"So this class is repeating last period too? Eh, Un-chan?"

"Shhhh—Quiet. I will explain later, ordering with this kind of order. Follow me quietly for now... Please."

After she spoke in a serious voice, Taizou and Kana looked at each other then obediently closed their mouths. What a great help—A safe place to hide must be found next.

In the process of escaping the classroom, Un Izoey had swiftly reported the situation to her boss. Everything had gone smoothly so far, but the bell then rang immediately after that, prompting class to begin again. In other words, after the hypnosis, the students and teachers were having the exact same lesson as an hour ago's. As for details like records in notebooks, their cognition was probably tampered to fit the situation.

Even though lessons were taking place in this extraordinary manner, lessons were lessons. Needless to say, students walking outside of classrooms would be conspicuous beyond measure.

Un Izoey lifted her head slightly to check out the surrounding situation. Looking out the window next to her, she could see the connecting corridor leading to the opposite school building as well as the two knights walking nonchalantly along that corridor. They were wrapped in gray coats, talking to each other while keeping watch on the surroundings vigilantly.

The hypnotized students did not see them. These outsiders were strutting around the place openly yet Un Izoey's trio had to sneak around despite being students. It felt very ironic.

"...This way. Keep yourselves low."

Un Izoey changed their route to get away from the knights' direction. Only after their presences were out of range did she quietly take her cellphone out from her pocket. No signal. During the call to Pakuaki, the line had cut off suddenly after she explained the basic situation. Ever since, the phone had been showing no signal.

(Just as the Lab Chief said, they found a way to jam the signal?)

Un Izoey thought it was very likely. The Knights Dominion intended to establish a second Knights Dominion here even at the cost of reducing their main stronghold's functionality. Their serious commitment was absolutely genuine, hence meticulous measures would not be surprising. Unlike irreplaceable knights whose numbers were limited, the effort required would be far less, if all it took was setting up a signal jamming device.

(It means they already took into consideration the risk factor of people unaffected by the hypnosis still in school...)

In other words, the trio's current situation was also within enemy expectations.

—Un Izoey could not help but think, had this school turned into a hunting ground? A place fenced up with meticulous preparations. Then releasing drugs safely to put to sleep the animals inside, making it easy to take away their fangs and fur any time. Cruel hunters were currently on the prowl, searching for dangerous prey that had not succumbed to the drugs—

Un Izoey narrowed her eyes, thinking of her pride and determination. Hunters? Compared to them, she was far more qualified. A hunter could not be hunted in reverse.

Cautiously, she moved along the corridor, turned a corner and went down the staircase to reach the ground floor. Then looking out from the stairwell, she observed—

Two knights, different from the pair she saw earlier, were walking along the corridor, heading towards her in a straight line. She hastily pulled her head back. Fortunately, they did not notice her. After making a gesture to the two behind her to be quiet, she decided to go back the way they came, but—

"...!"

There were footsteps directly above. In other words—Someone was descending the staircase. Not students. Those footsteps did not come from indoor shoes. Instead, it was the crisp sound of metal-reinforced outdoor shoes.

They were surrounded!

She instantly pondered. What to do? Fight? If possible, she did not want to cause a commotion, but there was no choice by this point. Launch a surprise attack to swiftly render one side incapable of combat. So long as none of the knights were squad leader level, it should be possible. Could she do it before the other pair noticed? Or should she eliminate them in sequence? However, oh right, there were ordinary people present—

Just at this moment, Un Izoey's gaze ferociously went harsh.

Apart from the footsteps approaching from above and the ground floor corridor—
A third presence appeared.

It was directly behind them.

"This way."

"!"

The instant someone grabbed her shoulder, Un Izoey's body moved on its own.
But halfway in her motion, she realized various things—

"Hi, anything out of place?"

"Nope. How about your side?"

"The same. But high school lessons really bring back memories."

"Nostalgia is fine, but don't be careless. With so many people here after all, it
won't come as a surprise if a few students escaped Lady Taciturn's hypnosis."

"Ordinary brats unaware of anything can be easily handled."

"But some of them aren't ordinary brats. Like the 'Hunter' of the Lab Chief's
Nation is also a student here, but it's confirmed that she is missing from her usual
classroom—It's best to assume that she evaded hypnosis."

"Hmm, then make sure she doesn't rip out your throat with her teeth."

"Good heavens, now this job is getting more meaningful, I'm so glad..."

After ending their conversation along the staircase, the two teams departed.

Un Izoey was listening to this dialogue taking place overhead. Although her heart
skipped a beat when they mentioned her, her appearance was very conspicuous in
school to begin with. She already knew that it was just a matter of time before her

absence from the classroom was noticed. Now that they had discovered that she was moving outside freely, the knights must have raised their alert level slightly. She must proceed with greater caution—

"Isn't it time for you to move this knife away, Dark-skin? Most regrettably, I have neither the generosity nor the luxury of time to practice beard-shaving with you at the moment."

"Oh... Sorry, I apologize with this kind of apology."

Still maintaining her posture of sitting on the floor, Un Izoey retracted her leg that was raised as though performing an overhead kick in soccer, with knife pointed at the girl behind her. She had attacked with her foot instinctively due to someone suddenly grabbing her shoulder from behind. Although she had stopped just before the knife stabbed into the throat, compared to withdrawing the knife, she could only prioritize hiding just now.

The current location was behind the stairwell, a space where things like buckets and cleaning equipment was kept. Un Izoey's group was hiding in this cramped space that could only be entered by stooping. And the person who had led them here was—

"So... Although I've no idea why these two are with you, what is going on right now?"

Showing no signs of fear despite the knife held against her throat, simply scowling as usual with arms crossed in nonchalance—the classmate, Sakuramairi Shiraho.

Hearing this comment of hers and feeling muffled breaths blowing against her hands, Un Izoey was reminded of those two's presence. She moved away her hands, which she had used to cover their mouths while dragging them here.

"Puha! I-I'm almost about to suffocate... Eh, Sakuramairi-san?"

"And you call yourself a member of the swimming team? By the way, Un Izoey-san's hand has a kind of earthy smell, it's so comforting... Wow, you're skipping class too, Sakuramairi-san?"

The two of them were staring at Shiraho in surprise. Regardless how little they knew about the truth, for someone like Shiraho to be found in such a dirty space under the stairs—That alone was already quite a rare spectacle.

"These two—My hand was forced. Sakuramairi Shiraho, how much do you know about the current situation?"

"Nothing at all, Dark-skin. I've been sleeping in the infirmary. After hearing the bell, I was planning to go back to the classroom when I noticed the strange situation in the sports ground with a group of weirdos walking around in the school building. Thinking something must have happened, I decided to hide first... A bizarre situation outside, a group of abnormal-looking people, and there's me. Wouldn't walking outside as normal under such circumstances be tantamount to declaring 'Please rape me'?"

Although Un Izoey had no idea whether they were going to rape anyone—neither could she promise for certain they were not going to rape anyone—In any case, she concluded that Shiraho had made a very wise decision. Still, there was one concerning detail.

"You were sleeping in the infirmary, this means..."

"Are you feeling unwell somewhere~?"

Kana proceeded to ask but Shiraho puffed out her chest and replied with inexplicable pride:

"No, because I pulled an all-nighter last night, I was very sleepy."

"Wow, such freedom..."

"Your reason for being in the infirmary is not important. Since you were sleeping, it means you did not hear the announcement, right?"

Un Izoey was already 99% sure of the answer. This was just confirmation. Shiraho was currently behaving no different from Kana and Taizou, but definitely unlike the hypnotized students.

"What announcement? I am a very sound sleeper. Every time I sleep, I do it with the determination of 'never waking up until I am absolutely satisfied.'"

"Oh..."

Anyway, the hypnotic suggestion evidently failed to take effect during her sleep. The cursed words had not reached *her consciousness*—That was theoretically the case.

However, since she was not hypnotized, it meant Un Izoey had to explain the story to her somewhat. Unlike Kana and Taizou, she could omit certain explanations, so it was very easy.

"My explanation: simply stated, the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion is here. They captured this school. Students are hypnotized to not see them, to lose their memory, to keep repeating the same hour of time."

"I will go find Sovereignty."

However, Shiraho's response went as far as to omit a great deal all at once. This was too abrupt. Standing up, without any hesitation, Shiraho prepared to exit this space under the stairs.

"Umm..."

"I don't know the details, but in any case, the 'enemy' did something to create this situation, right? In that case, there is only one thing I have to do. I must stay by her side."

Simple and clear. It was almost like solving an equation without any unknowns, like proudly declaring "one plus one equals two." Her gaze was candid, genuine and without hesitation. Her willpower was crystalline.

From Un Izoey's view, she looked absolutely dazzling.

"Cellphone... Still no signal? Good grief, how useless of the telephone company for calls to be impossible in such an important time. Can't they provide a plan with a hotline to Sovereignty any time?"

Shiraho complained while looking at her cellphone. Un Izoey crawled out from the hiding spot and asked at the same time:

"Please accompany us, I request this kind of request. Our goals are aligned, cooperating should be a good choice, right?"

"What is your goal?"

"To find a hiding place that will not be found. This place is just temporary after all. But you should know better than us—more familiar with places in this school where other people will not find, I judge this kind of judgment."

For the purposes of what one would call a tryst.

Although Un Izoey did not say it out, this small detail was already known.

Shiraho's lips turned into a frown for an instant as she glared viciously at her—But soon after, she shrugged greatly and sighed.

"Very well... As long as we meet up with Sovereignty, we have to find a place to hide anyway. Since no one knows what will happen, I suppose it's better to have a bodyguard."

Despite her tendency to follow her own dazzling impulses, Shiraho was quite practical. This was probably part of her personal traits as well.

Un Izoey reached out to help Kana and Taizou exit the space under the stairs while she asked:

"Then the next course of action is?"

"Do you really need to ask? Start with the most likely place where Sovereignty will be found, if she's not there, go to the next likely spot. If enemies appear, you handle them. That's all."

So simple that Un Izoey could not help but shudder in awe.

The group tiptoed their way through the school building.

As soon as they noticed signs of knights, they would try their hardest to find a hiding place in an empty classroom or under the stairs like before, to wait until the enemy passed by. Thus, it took them several times longer than usual to reach the first destination. Un Izoey had prepared herself to resort to violence if they encountered the enemy, but fortunately, there was no need.

Before them was another building's top floor which differed from normal classrooms. No one would come here without business. In other words, it was totally deserted.

Unlike corridors outside classrooms where lessons were in progress, the silence hanging over this corridor was even more intense than that of a vacuum.

Un Izoey stopped in front of the door and cautiously touched the handle—It did not turn.

"...Seems locked."

"Is that so? Then I shall open it."

Shiraho decisively took out a key from her pocket.

"How did you get this place's key?"

"If that masked deviant were to do obscene things to Sovereignty in a locked room, what could be done? Holding onto a spare key is the minimum precaution, of course? Given this natural right, I decided on my own to duplicate her key."

"..."

Immediately, Shiraho inserted the key into the keyhole without any hesitation at all, unlocking the door. Then without a moment's pause, she turned the handle directly and barged inside.

Shiraho's excessive lack of caution took Un Izoey by surprise. Just as she frantically chased after her into the room—

"K-Kyahhhhhhhhhh!"

"!"

A figure hiding next to the entrance swung something down at them. Stepping between Shiraho and the figure, Un Izoey used the knife in her foot to block the attack. Instantly, a metallic collision was heard while she felt a minor impact. The attacker's weapon was made of a handle and a main body. A metal unlike iron. Round rather than sharp, its shape included a depression with depth—

In other words—

A frying pan.

"Hwah!? Oh dear, oh dear, Un-chan!? Aw aw wawa, sorry, I was thinking the bad guys' evil claws had finally reached over here! Oh, it's Shiraho~! Awawa, come to think of it, if it weren't for Un-chan, I would have smacked your head hard, Shiraho, now that would've been terribleeeeeeeeeee!?"

Her last sentence ended in a weird scream because Shiraho had hugged her, maid outfit and all, as hard as she could, even burying and rubbing her face forcefully against her chest.

"Ahhh... Sovereignty, I wouldn't care about that. Even if being hit will hurt, it's completely insignificant compared to this blissful joy of seeing you. No, if I were hit during this blissful joy, that sense of pain would surely become one of today's precious memories. I will make this a day of commemoration and christen it the Sacred Sovereignty Day of Pain to be passed down the generations."

"D-Don't make it sound like a religious activity! You're acting a bit weird, Shiraho~!"

"She seemed quite calm but was actually worried sick about you, I speculation this kind of speculation. So it is just an overreaction."

Un Izoey remarked and returned the knife she used to block the frying pan back under her skirt. Taking another look, she found that Sovereignty was not only holding a frying pan but also wearing a pot tilted on her head. Using it as a helmet...? In any case, judging from her behavior, Un Izoey concluded that they were hiding here due to a clear sense of crisis.

Indeed, *they*. Sovereignty was not the only person staying in the superintendent's office—

"Ara ara~ Please allow me to remark in fear and trepidation, you two are still so close and intimate~ Ufufufu."



"Shiraho-san... Thank goodness you're okay. By the way, Isuzu, why were you speaking with such arrogance just now? I'm gonna hurt you, got that?"

"Ahya, you're already hurting me~ Also, you're pinching even harder than usual~"

Shiraho suddenly separated from Sovereignty the instant she heard the two girls and coughed "ahem" to clear her throat. As though nothing had happened at all, she coldly tossed her hair.

"Oh, you girls are here too?"

"Y-Yeah... Umm... Sorry..."

"N-No need to apologize."

The people before them included the black-haired shrine maiden—the cursed set of kagura bells, Isuzu—and her owner, Hayakawa Chihaya.

Kana and Taizou were already staring in surprise at the various things happening in the room, but now, they both tilted their heads in further puzzlement.

"After entering the locked room, a maid attacked us, then the janitor shrine maiden appeared inside along with an underclassman who sometimes talks to Akki and friends... Mumumu, this feels like even more complicated foreshadowing!"

"And for some reason, the underclassman is still wearing gym clothes, looks like PE class is the key!"

"Ugh..."

Just as Taizou pointed out, Chihaya was dressed in gym clothes from head to toe for some reason. As though realizing only now, Chihaya awkwardly pulled her shirt hem lower and shrank away. If anything, rather than Taizou, she seemed more concerned about Shiraho's gaze, although Un Izoey did not think she needed to feel embarrassed about this getup.

Compared to this, there was something else that needed to be confirmed first.

"None of you—heard it, right?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation: precisely~"

Isuzu answered. With an unfathomable smile as usual, she said:

"As kagura bells for playing music to the gods, we are more sensitive to *sound* than others... Consequently, even it was an unknown language, the instant I heard the strange voice speak over the public announcement system, my mind instinctively warned *this voice must not be listened to~*"

It probably happened at the same time as when Un Izoey had felt that decisive chill, just as the announcer yelled "hört" with all that speaker noise. Since Isuzu had felt danger as a result, it meant the word could carry the meaning of activating the cursed ability, namely, "this word is for releasing the curse next."

"Then in that instant, I used 'wordless wall' to shield myself from the voice. As it so happened, Sovereignty-san was next to me so I covered her ears with my palms~ ...Oh, sorry for not mentioning it until now, but I was sweeping behind the gym together with Sovereignty-san~"

"That's right, with the superintendent and Zenon-san absent, I had nothing to do at all. Although I heard they were going to come later in the day..."

"I can't believe you started sweeping on your own initiative, how amazing, Sovereignty. I must lavish you with praise."

"Ehehe~"

So—Un Izoey looked at Chihaya.

"And you?"

"I... Umm, there was PE class in the gym but I was just watching from the side. The rule forcing students to change into gym clothes even if they're just watching is so unnecessary, but whatever."

Then Chihaya exhaled lightly and took out from a pocket in her shorts something resembling a wire to show them.

"Because the teacher wasn't in the mood to teach, it was pretty much free time and I secretly listened to music on earphones. But it looks like I was lucky I did that. By the time I realized, everyone was acting really weird. Isuzu also ran in from outside to get me."

Hence, the three of them hid in the superintendent's office after meeting up—That was what happened.

"I see now... Thank goodness everyone is fine. Anyway, we should continue our discussion and share information to decide what to do next."

"That's right~ Discussion is very important. I've been pretending to be a detective all this time, but I can't keep the charade going any longer."

"Yeah, Kana and I will be really grateful if you can give an official explanation~ Oh, but please make things as simple to understand as possible!"

Un Izoey glanced at Kana and Taizou then said:

"Of course, I did not forget this too... Is this place safe?"

"Uh~ Well, Shiraho and the rest of you were the first people we ran into after hiding here..."

"Even so, no one knows if this place is safe or not. The superintendent's office seems to be a very important place, so even though those people's goal is unknown, it might be just by chance that they haven't come by yet—"

Just as Chihaya was saying that, Un Izoey frowned and turned around to look at the entrance of the superintendent's office—In other words, outside. Of course, she could not possibly see through the door, but she could make deductions, like sensing the movements of invisible prey from the sounds and shaking in the bushes.

Indeed, sound was the issue.

"Those are footsteps~..."

Perhaps even more sensitive towards sounds than her, Isuzu whispered.

Truly faint footsteps. The echoing of shoes on the corridor. Multiple. They seemed to be slowly getting clearer. In other words, they seemed to be approaching.

"My guess: judgment that it might be Knights Dominion."

"W-W-W-W-What to do...? Should we run away?"

"If we rush out into the corridor now, we'll just crash straight into them, right? Wouldn't it be better to hide?"

Chihaya nodded to agree with Shiraho.

"I agree too. Hey, maid, what about the next room?"

"The secretary's room? It's possible to hide there, but you won't be able to reach the corridor from there... It's a dead end. If the enemy goes in to find us, it's over—!"

Un Izoey bit her lip.

A frontal assault was also very risky and would require incapacitating multiple opponents in an instant. Otherwise, the noncombatants here were going to be in danger. No, she already knew that Isuzu's curse granted her power to control wind and nature, so as long as they went all-out—Perhaps they might manage barely to force their way through this crisis. However, it would surely expand the scale of the commotion. If such a large group had to run away again, it was hard to predict an optimistic outcome.

(! ...What should be done...?)

During her indecision, the footsteps continued to approach.

The room was already in total silence. Sovereignty was holding tears back, unsure what to do. Shiraho was glaring at the door with hostility on her face. Chihaya was holding her breath while Isuzu silently stepped in front of her.

Then—

The footsteps would pass straight by—This finally ended up as dashed hopes.

Ultimately, the footsteps suddenly stopped in front of the door to the superintendent's office.

Part 2

The last knight's head merged with the Yachi house's white boundary wall, in other words, he was smashed into the wall. A radial pattern of cracks were added to the scarred wall that was about to collapse. As for whether the knight remained alive, it would depend on the toughness of his neck bones.

Pendragon withdrew his hand from the wall, releasing his grip on the back of the knight's head. Fragments of the wall came off and fell in a clatter. He swept his gaze across his surroundings.

The Yachi home's garden was a tragic mess without anything moving. There were knights collapsed in pools of blood. There were knights with all their limbs twisted in strange directions. There were knights buried into crater-like depressions in the garden. As for the knights who were no longer recognizable, they were probably extolling their various postures around the place. Like planted into the tatami floor inside the house. But Pendragon was not too interested.

All the knights were no longer moving.

But things did not count as finished yet—This one point was the most important.

"So... Come out now. You were waiting for me to finish things with the knights, right?"

After he called out—From under the tragic-looking veranda, in other words, under the eaves, a woman crawled out. No, categorizing her as a woman was still an ambiguous issue.

"Hmm~ I wasn't actually waiting for you guys per se, it's just that as the master of the house, in charge of protecting this home, I have to stay behind to make sure no one burns the house down when no one's home~"

"How rude. We're not going to do something like that!"

"A worry that truly arouses indignance/agreement in the accused."

Listening to the female voices complaining in anger, Pendragon turned his head lightly. He was thinking of the people earlier, filled with zeal, madness and intensity of emotion, now motionless.

"Hmm, me aside, it's really impossible to say for sure whether these knights might commit arson."

"I know right?"

The woman—Yachi Honatsu—waved the cellphone in his hand while nodding repeatedly like he was saying "that's what I thought." A few questions surfaced in Pendragon's mind.

"If what you said just now really was your reason for not running away... You sure look pretty calm despite the obvious damage to your home. Aren't the Japanese known for placing great importance on their homes?"

"I'm not calm at all, I'll have you know that I'm very angry~ Smoke is rising from my head, see! Who should I demand compensation from? If a certain pretty boy has some self-awareness, he should take a bit of responsibility. I really hope he'll discreetly put a strack of anonymous cash into the mailbox later. I believe the strongest man should demonstrate he is strongest in being considerate too. Oh, roughly 300 million yen will do."

Pendragon shrugged at the composed Honatsu then asked the second question. The most important question.

Seeing the situation growing more and more interesting, his lips naturally curled in a grin.

"—What are you doing with that cellphone?"

Honatsu giggled while answering:

"I called someone. You should thank me properly."

"Oh? Who did you call?"

"Someone you might be happy to see. Although you should be very familiar already."

At this point, a presence appeared from behind—as well as voices.

"Indeed, extremely familiar already. In fact, it could end up feeling nostalgic instead."

"...Haha~ Even though we clearly met just this morning?"

Pendragon grinned and turned around.

Three figures had surmounted the wall and appeared in the garden. The one in the center was of course—an old friend, also a former rival, as well as being the man who had betrayed everything belonging to the past. Dressed in a suit, wearing a gas mask, he looked very restrained. Perhaps this appearance did suit his reserved lifestyle quite well.

"I was thinking you would've gone to school for sure."

"Had I reached the school half an hour earlier, I definitely would be locked inside right now. I noticed the unusual situation as soon as I reached the gates, so I hastily turned around 180 degrees. Thanks to an unexpected swim in the ocean, I had to take a shower first. Well, I originally intended to get to school early for

once to handle all the work that's been piled up, so I guess I should say it's all thanks to my old friend calling me out."

"I'm glad I was able to help. By the way—There's also someone I didn't see this morning. Oh right, now this is someone whom I can say really brings back the memories..."

Pendragon gazed at her.

In front of Pendragon, apart from Sekaibashi Gabriel, there were his long-time followers, the two women whom Pendragon was acquainted with too.

One was Houjyou Zenon. Calm and composed, like wearing an iron mask, the younger sister adept at knife throwing. Probably injured during the battle this morning on the duel ship Leviathan, she had signs of bandaging on various parts of her body. To have survived even after a fight against Pendragon, this meant she definitely possessed a certain level of talent. What a shame.

The other person was—

"Ahhh... Seriously, so tired..."

The glasses-wearing elder sister, Houjyou Ganon. The incarnation of laziness and sloppiness.

As indicated by her tone of voice, it felt like her entire body might jump into bed to take a nap any moment.

However, her eyes beneath her glasses were staring straight in Pendragon's direction.

Standing casually, her body was clearly conveying the will to face off against him.

She was also holding a sword in her right hand.

"Are you preparing for a big fight? You couldn't have failed to understand the meaning of standing before me with a sword in hand, right?"

"On the other hand, do *you* understand what you're doing?"

She yawned lazily, her shoulders heaving up and down dramatically. However, this did not present any openings. That was the nature of this woman. Because her lifestyle itself was full of openings, there were no openings. Being the opening herself, no openings would appear as a result.

With an ambiguous facial expression that resembled a smile yet not a smile, she then said:

"Sigh... Max-kun, what on earth are you doing? Isn't this really unseemly?"

"That name sure brings memories. But Houjyou, isn't it too late to talk about unseemliness by this point? Haven't you seen me in unseemly situations many times in the past already? There was even one time when I pissed my pants while strangled by Long."

"Yes, but that's a separate discussion. I can't believe you've turned into a lolicon, chasing after a tiny girl's ass all over town. You've reached maximum unseemliness."

"I never knew you had such a strong sense of justice. This is my first time finding out in all the years I've known you."

"Sense of justice? Wrong~ ...This is being a wise consumer. Because that little one always cuts my hair carefully but gives me a friendship discount. An excellent partner for a poor school physician living on a meager salary. It'd be a huge problem for me if she were gone. Also, because engaging in random chitchat while my hair is being cut would be very tiring, she always stays silent, so considerate. She'll even serve canned fizzy barley juice for me as a drink."

"Is that a bit illegal? Though I'm not quite sure myself."

"Why? There's absolutely no problem with drink service of juice for customers during haircuts."

Ganon turned and shook her head at this point as though trying to dispel drowsiness.

"Sigh, I haven't spoken so much in a long while, so tiring. But even if it's for the sake of my life of comfortable haircuts, it's tiring too. However..."

She narrowed her eyes slightly.

She lightly waved the sword that was hanging on her fingertips.

"Doing nothing now then regretting after the fact—That would be even more tiring. So that's that."

This was equivalent to a declaration of war. Her words and attitude served as evidence. She was serious and had no intention of backing down.

"On the contrary, I think doing nothing would be the smart choice."

"Even when you say that, I have even more reason to fight *if it is something only I can do*."

"Onee-sama is not fighting alone."

Zenon took out her throwing knives and entered a serious stance. Naturally, the younger sister showed no intention of backing down either. Pendragon sighed.

"Jeez—Are we going to fight, Sekaibashi?"

"I'm totally here just to cheer and provide moral support. We won't let you catch up to Kuroe-kun so easily... At least allow us to buy a bit of time, although that's not really enough to compensate them or to repay owed debts."

The old friend in the gas mask shrugged and answered. At this moment, Pendragon also heard a voice from behind.

"Oh dear, is that what you're thinking? Speaking of which, I heard that the few of you deceived them last year... But I'm sure Haruaki and his friends don't mind anymore, so Gab-chan, neither side owes each other anything~"

"Haha, on the matter of debts, it also includes what I owe you, Honatsu-san. Since it's impossible for me to ever repay in full, whether you guys mind would be irrelevant. I'm just deciding on my own to do it—I believe that protecting this home is necessary."

This time, Pendragon sensed Honatsu shrugging from behind him.

Granaury spoke again. It was quite rare... But seeing as Sekaibashi Gabriel was the opponent, Pendragon could understand. Sekaibashi could be considered her old friend as well, the owner of a fellow spear and dear friend of hers. Pendragon also knew there was further significance beyond that—

"Sekaibashi, since you are present here, regardless whether you are merely here to cheer or the fact that your body was wrecked, you cannot remain uninvolved. Even so, you persist?"

"I'm very grateful for your worries, but as these two's employer, I'm obliged to stay here. I've already resolved myself."

"...How noble/foolish..."

Granaury said no more.

In the end, what needed to be done was already decided. Pendragon slowly stepped forward.

Before him, Ganon's body looked as though her body's foundation was suddenly pulled out. Not mentally, but the foundation of the physical body standing before him. Her body was starting to sway left and right slightly, as weak and powerless as willows blowing in the wind. Despite having a center of gravity, it was as though she had none. Such was the contradictory impression.

"What a weirdo! Hurry and defeat her, Maximilian!"

"Yeah—Exactly what I'm thinking!"

Pendragon instantly closed in and swung his fist, covered by Riko's armor and armed with Granaury's blade, then immediately launched a flying kick.

Swaying left, tilting right, she waved to and fro.

"Ahh... So tiring..."

But she was merely saying the words without meaning them. Narrowing her eyes sharply behind those glasses, she focused her gaze on his every move. Then her body reacted according to his movements.

She blocked his fist and parried Granaury's blade with her sword. The flying kick was dodged. During the exchange, Zenon's throwing knife also flew at his eyeball. So accurate—But he tilted his head to dodge it then stepped forward to force her move. As though devoting herself to the role of support, Zenon pulled back by an extreme distance.

Pendragon lightly shook his fist that had been blocked.

With her body swaying slightly, Ganon was holding her sword so lightly that it seemed as though her grip would come loose any moment. She was not standing in one spot—At a rate imperceptible to the naked eye, she was slowly closing in at a crawling insect's pace.

Covering his body, Riko yelled:

"HEY! What are you doing, Maximilian!? Fight more seriously!"

"I am, but there are many reasons."

"Are you for real~? But it's true, that woman's movements are really weird!~ It's so creepy!"

Those movements were part of the Void Night Sword, a sword style that kept the opponent deceived through feints and obfuscation, the epitome of "gentle" swordsmanship. In stark contrast to the concept of distinct *moves*, this sword style particularly emphasized reaction and adaptability on the fly. If usual sword styles

aimed to inflict wounds on the enemy's body, then this type of sword technique would be about *how to make the opponent hit you*. A concept of minus in opposition to plus. Rather than seeking to win, a theory to prevent the opponent from winning—No, more precisely, this was neither skill nor swordsmanship. It was a "way of life" incorporating strength of will and how to analyze battle situations.

"The strongest eh... Yes, you might be the strongest indeed, Max-kun. Just from the few moves earlier, I can understand fully. I'm probably the only one who can barely engage you in combat—*Although that's in another sense completely different from being strong.*"



"I know, that's why fighting you is meaningless. Move aside."

"No can do."

Ganon walked slowly but would swing her sword as soon as she entered attack range. Neither fierce nor fast, but there was a depressing atmosphere exuded by a unique rhythm of *opportunity* as though she would seize gaps between thoughts, swinging her sharp sword just as the enemy was deciding whether to dodge or to block.

Pendragon deliberately avoiding thinking. Thinking would become a liability. Allowing his body to act on instinct, he used his elbow to deflect the sword's tip while he knocked down Zenon's thrown knife at the same time. Just as he was about to counterattack Ganon's second strike that was seizing this opportunity— This turned out to be a feint baiting him to counterattack so that she could counterattack him in turn. A trap laid through multiple layers of feints. Pendragon retracted his fist.

"NWAH! This feels so annoying!"

"That's the kind of opponent she is. Getting agitated won't help things, Riko."

"Okay... Let's continue, Max-kun. Let's continue this match that doesn't decide who is stronger or weaker, let's continue this match that isn't really a fight, let's continue this match where nothing is clear. Ahhh, this isn't a situation that can be explained clearly in words to begin with... So tiring..."

Ganon's tone of voice was very lazy, but only her eyes glared seriously at him.

She was not having an easy time either. Pulling out all the techniques at her disposal, she tried her hardest to confront Pendragon. He could feel this level of resolve and determination.

What she produced—

Unsteadily, she blocked all attacks.

Equally unsteadily, she undermined all defenses.

A unique sword that went as far as to blur the meaning of battle.

The previous Commander, the creator of this sword style, had named it the Void Night Sword—He passed this secret technique to no one else except Ganon who had the potential to surpass him. A meaningless technique devised by the former strongest man, a miraculous product created through synergy with her own disposition.

"Indeed, this is no contest of strength... Good grief, this is such a pain."

He could not help but grumble quietly. Invisibly, Riko seemed to tilt her head in puzzlement.

"You're so unmotivated, Maximilian. How rare. It's been such a long time since we last met this kind of opponent who can survive this long even though we've attacked so many times, right~? Normally, you'd look really happy."

"This situation is different."

"What delightful/regrettable analytical ability. Your eyesight is so poor that one can't help but worry whether the sockets were subjected to rigid, forced entry."

"Huh?"

Probably failing to understand even after listening to Pendragon and Granaury, Riko could only ask in puzzlement. Hence, Pendragon searched his mind for an even simpler explanation and said:

"This has nothing to do with strength. Against her, it's purely a question of compatibility."

He could assert with certainty, *the Void Night Sword was not strong.*

One could even call it meaningless. But because it involved movements of high difficulty, training the body to familiarity required special talent and potential.

Conversely, all it could achieve was stalling for time and showing mercy to others.

But since this technique *could be used on anyone*—As soon as it was compared with other techniques, it would acquire special meaning. Looking at it the other way, one had to focus solely on this sword style if one wanted to find special significance within it.

A technique for subtracting enemy action rather than producing things in the enemy's direction, in terms of results, it was a technique for creating zero. In other words, the Void Night Sword was itself the *rule* that "subtracting the same value gives zero." Regardless whether the enemy's value was one or a hundred, all values were the same when facing this rule.

Indeed—The same for every and anyone. Whether against the weakest man who would die from a single touch or Maximilian Pendragon, the strongest man, she would still be able to render the fight's meaning void using the same unsteady swaying.

This one property ended up becoming the technique's meaning of existence. This was its true nature.

In other words—

"Her ability is the *only sword style in the world that can deny victory to the strongest being*. Only when confronting me, the strongest man, does its existence carry value and meaning. Despite being laid back and lazy normally, she becomes extremely sharp only when facing a dragon, just like a dragonslayer sword in fantasy stories... See, isn't this a pain?"

Part 3

Voices could be heard.

"It's locked."

"Just break it directly."

Then soon after, destructive noise was heard definitely.

Reduced by one layer of separation, the footsteps sounded even nearer than previously. Un Izoey held her breath and relaxed her toes that were holding the knife. Too much tension now would mean immobility when enemy attacks arrived.

"So, this is Sekaibashi Gabriel's castle huh...? Tsk, hey, look at this."

"Looks like the tasteless collection of this room's master. Do you think there are Wathes among them?"

"God knows. Although it feels like just a whole bunch of unguarded decorations, I can't say for sure. Anyway, let's just break everything first. Even if it's just a possibility, loathsome Wathes cannot be allowed to continue their wretched existence."

"Agreed."

After the voices conversed in annoyance, intermittent sounds destruction started the next second. Like fallen objects breaking, things crushed underfoot after falling to the ground, or swords slicing at the wall.

Un Izoey gulped. She had expected that they were not going to leave the superintendent's collection alone—In other words, the numerous pieces of junk and scrap metal that resembled Wathes, hanging on the wall.

Choosing this place was the biggest gamble. How was it going to turn out? Or perhaps in the next instant—

She glanced around. Shiraho, Sovereignty, Chihaya, Isuzu, Taizou, Kana, everyone was here but unable to move. Things would be over as soon as they were found. Judging from the voices, there were two enemies... Not to the point of being unbeatable, but Un Izoey had heard that the knights had been

strengthened in power, which meant she could not guarantee finishing a fight unscathed.

"...I forgot to check. What about that door?"

"I'll take a look. You continue with the toys."

"Got it, be careful."

The door to the secretary's room could be heard—But there was no problem.

"How was it?"

"No one's hiding inside... That's what it looks like. Nothing unusual. I'll continue to search."

Probably coming from the secretary's room, a faint voice could barely be heard. The sounds of destruction of the superintendent's collection continued without stopping.

"...Hey, say something. Or else I'll assume you died in an ambush."

"You're too wary."

"Don't get careless. There are supposed to be people who were unaffected by Lady Taciturn's hypnosis."

The person apparently checking the secretary's room continued to converse with the knight who continued to break the collection. In any case, all Un Izoey's group could do was stay silent and listen to their dialogue.

"...To be honest, this is really a nuisance. If we could eliminate half of their numbers, the mental and physical effort to patrol like this would be halved as well."

"Hey hey, they're ordinary people after all. Eliminating half of them now would be too much... Although if necessary, there's no choice but to sacrifice them for the mission. Also, for the goal of founding the second Knights Dominion, now is

the critical moment. As members of the organization, we must stay unified and not complain about orders from above."

"Either way, Lady Taciturn isn't inside this school. Thanks to «Auschwitz-Birkenau», no one can get in or out now. No need to worry about her hearing us, right?"

"If the squad leaders get wind of it, they might contact her. Like 'a certain misbehaving knight wants to take advantage of the situation, so please give him a makeover using hypnosis' or something like that. Because if something really comes up, they are the ones to report to Lady Taciturn."

"Hmm... But I'm thinking that the three squad leaders who came this time are the type who simply kill misbehaving knights on the spot if they encounter them."

"That's right. So let's do our job properly to prevent that from happening."

Not long after that—

"...Okay, looks like there's no one in this room."

"There! Now all the toys have been taken care off too."

The persistent noise of destruction suddenly stopped.

Un Izoey felt sweat dripping down her forehead and quietly exhaled. By this point, the knights had not shown any signs of discovering a certain something—It meant that the gamble had paid off.

The knights had not discovered the hidden switch under a certain mask on the wall. This mechanism's structure was not exposed directly, instead, part of the wall had been made into a lid to hide the switch beneath. So the knights had overlooked the lid's seams on the wall? Or perhaps they were simply swinging their swords at the masks on the wall, leaving residual fragments hanging, thus leaving the seams cleverly hidden? There were many possibilities, but anyway, the fact that the enemy had not noticed was good enough. How fortunate.

(Right, speaking of fortunate...)

Un Izoey narrowed her eyes and recalled the knights' conversation from just now. It felt like there were a few important points mentioned. She must record them to avoid forgetting. The cellphone still could not make calls at the moment but there might be a chance to transmit information to the outside world later—No, regarding this point, it felt like there was some kind of contradiction between what the knights discussed and their current situation—

Hearing the voices of knights again at this time, she suddenly turned her attention back to reality.

"Let's head to the next location. This place is done."

"Yeah. By the way, back to the earlier subject... If we find the Hunter from the Lab Chief's Nation and the others, dispose of them on the spot. But I forgot to confirm, what if we found other students who happened to be not hypnotized, what do we do with them? What are the orders from above?"

Then what they said—

With a genuine sense of foreboding, Un Izoey's slight sense of surging relief in hopes that "they might be able to keep up the charade longer" was completely buried.

"It's fine to kill them, I think."

"Understood."

The footsteps left the superintendent's office and gradually grew distant.

Listening to the departing footsteps through the wall, Un Izoey returned the knife on her foot to under her skirt. Once the footsteps disappeared completely, she turned around and moved away from the secret door where she had remained until now as a precaution.

This was a small and narrow room—In other words, the secret room next to the superintendent's office. Sovereignty had remembered this place in the nick of time, allowing all of them to hide successfully inside. In terms of timing, it was truly quite a close shave.

"Phew~ We're saved..."

"It's all to your credit, Sovereignty."

"Y-Yeah, but this place is very dear to the superintendent... So it's really forbidden to come in here without permission, and that thing must not be touched at all."

"I'm not going to touch it. Besides, this is a crisis concerning our chastity. I don't think that pervert can complain about providing a hiding place for us. Furthermore, I won't let him complain either. If he is unwilling to provide a hiding place, it will only develop into a lawsuit, meaning that, like a pervert, he wants to indirectly rob us of our chastity, that pervert."

Un Izoey glanced at what Sovereignty said "must not be touched at all"—in other words, the object lying on a stand in the middle of the room, covered by a piece of cloth—and pondered what was underneath.

(Right, I think I have heard this before...)

A fuzzy and half-understood unknown. The object that stood as Superintendent Sekaibashi Gabriel's goal. His former possession, the «Treason Piercer»—Its remains. This was the place for safekeeping those remains.

(Thinking back, there is no better hiding place than here. If the Lab Chief's clear thoughts had come up with this place, it would have saved a lot of effort...)

However, it was already hard enough to report the key points during that phone call earlier. Ultimately, they still managed to reach this place, so there was no point being picky.

Un Izoey swept her gaze across the people present in this secret room again.

Sovereignty, Shiraho, Chihaya in her gym clothes, the smiling Isuzu in her shrine maiden outfit, as well as—

"Kill us... Haha, that's a joke... right...?"

"I-I guess you're right~ By the way, there was so many thuds and crashes outside like a lot of stuff was getting broken, is that really okay? Although I don't find them very tasteful, the stuff there must be expensive, right...? But they broke all that stuff so they really are villains, right? Or they have no idea who they're dealing with..."

Kana and Taizou's faces were showing stiff smiles.

Having reached a safe hiding spot for now, they now had to think about their next move. If things had to be handled before proceeding with that, now was the only opportunity.

Hence—Un Izoey prepared herself.

"My statement: the time has arrived to turn your unknowns into knowns..."

Everyone's gaze gathered on her.

This moment was not meant to arrive originally, perhaps. If it were not necessary, if they had not noticed, it would have been a kind of blessing. Just like herself in the past, simply hunting in the jungle.

However, as soon as one realized the world was full of unknowns, as soon as one understood one's "total ignorance"...

Turning aside in an attempt to avoid it would only end up as a type of suffering—Probably.

"Although I'm not too clear on things... Please tell us. I will listen seriously to you."

"Me too. Anyway, if you've got something to tell us, let's listen first then think about it."

But at the same time, they might feel some pain after gaining knowledge.

Even so, Un Izoey still believed that they ought to know. It was at least better than suffering from leaving unknowns as unknowns. Giving them this kind of pain—This was surely her most irresponsible action, being the one who brought them here.

"So, perhaps you might not believe, but I will start explaining. First of all..."

Un Izoey gazed into those two's eyes.

With a calm voice, she began to speak.

"This is about what definitely exists in the world... So-called curses and cursed tools—"

These words, as well as those to follow...

Shall irrevocably change their world forever.

Perhaps this too might be a kind of curse—She thought to herself.

Part 4

While looking out for suspicious people in the surroundings, Haruaki's group cautiously made their way to school.

Roughly halfway, Kuroe stopped and whispered:

"Hmm~ I knew I couldn't ignore this option..."

"Huh?"

Haruaki looked back. Naturally, the cart he was pulling behind him, carrying Fear, also rumbled to a stop.

As though waiting for everyone's gaze to gather upon her, showing a pensive look the whole time—with a serious expression quite rare to see on her face—Kuroe looked up.

"Haru, everyone, I've decided to part ways here."

Totally unexpected words. Haruaki was quite shocked.

"W-Why?"

"..Kuroe-san, could you please explain your reasons?"

"Hmm. Uh~ Based on the current situation, I think our movements are quite easy to predict. Under these circumstances, going to check out the school is only natural and in fact, we are doing that. A development that can't be more predictable. This means that my stalker is going to guess it straight away... Although we were lucky enough to escape by leaving the knights for them, they might catch up very soon. Since I'm his only target, I think that splitting ways here is a solution."

"Kuroe-san, even if you're away, I believe they will still chase us to the school."

"But they might retreat if they don't find me here. At least it'll lower the chances of unnecessary fighting."

Then Kuroe suddenly relaxed her cheeks and smiled.

"...I don't want to make trouble for everyone. Now is truly the critical moment. It's the critical moment for whether our home will disappear or not. Even if I went to school with everyone, I'd only be able to help out a little, but if I separate with the group, it'll definitely reduce the chance that the strongest dragon will cause you guys trouble. Which way helps the most, for everyone's interests, this is the conclusion I've drawn after my own thoughts and careful consideration."

"But—"

Haruaki could only frown. He understood what Kuroe meant. She was most likely right. From the enemy perspective, compared to moving together as a conspicuous group, surely Kuroe would be much harder to find if she went off on her own. However, it was still hard for him to accept emotionally.

"But Kuroe-kun, Pendragon will keep pursuing you relentlessly. If you go off on your own, the risk will rocket sky high to an absolutely ridiculous degree when they find you."

"Don't worry~ I'm probably better at running away than anyone here. Back when the Family was chasing me during my travels, I didn't end up getting captured either. Muu, now that I think carefully, those were my first stalkers. What a crime it is for Kuroe-chan to be too cute for her own good, oh dear~"

Kuroe scratched her head as though going "how troublesome" in a perfect state of calm composure.

But Haruaki could not help but realize that Kuroe had no intention of changing her mind no matter what others said. Well thought-out determination was apparently hidden in those blank eyes of hers.

Then Kuroe walked forward lightly and knelt down in front of the cart Haruaki had been pulling. In other words, in front of Fear.

"Ficchi... You should've calmed a bit by now, right?"

No words replied. However, Haruaki could hear an exhalation as though she was hesitating over whether to speak. This counted as a type of answer. Kuroe smiled tenderly.

"Best not to think too much. If you spend your days acting silly like me, you might naturally cross the proverbial bridge when you come to it."

Just as earlier, a faint and ambiguous breath was heard from Fear again. Kuroe touched Fear's body then stood up again.

Haruaki sighed.

"Even if I tried to stop you, you'll still leave, right...? Will you really be okay?"

"Of course~ I plan on finding people in the shopping street to lend me a hiding spot. No matter what, I don't think the enemy has esper powers capable of finding me anywhere, right? I'll also do my best to avoid involving people from the shopping street, so don't worry about this."

"Please contact us if anything happens. No, even if nothing happened, please do call us regularly. Because we will worry."

"Got it~"

Kuroe responded cheerfully to Konoha and started walking. Towards a different direction from theirs.

Her pattering footsteps were quite light and carried no hesitation at all, as though she were simply going to work as usual.

The back of her petite figure gradually receded into the distance—

Finally, a voice was heard.

"Kuroe... Take care."

Still feeble, but at least these words from Fear carried much clearer willpower than before.

Probably glad to hear Fear talking to her, Kuroe turned around nimbly and smiled.

"You too, bye bye~"

Then waving her hand in an excessively lively manner, she started walking again.

Looking at her back, Haruaki felt a strange agitation rising in his heart. It felt like something he had naturally taken for granted until now was being lost, bit by bit.

Not only now. The tragic destruction at the house also counted. The same for the fingers of his left hand. Like Kuroe's petite figure slowly becoming far away—He could not help but feel this way.

An extremely lonely, melancholic and empty sense of loss.

(But... This is just the start. Because we haven't taken action yet.)

Haruaki convinced himself and pursed his lips.

While seeing Kuroe off, all he could do was believe that one day, he would surely take everything back.

Part 5

Advancing cautiously, Haruaki's group finally reached the school. Thinking they absolutely had to avoid getting attacked by the Knights Dominion in town, they spent several times longer than usual to get to school. However, for Fear who had not walked on her own two feet—It was actually quite difficult to get a grasp on the passage of time.

(Ah...)

After the school gates came into view, Fear squinted her invisible eyes.

The school gates were illuminated by the slanting rays of sunset.

The Knights Dominion was very dangerous right now. It was possible they might eliminate eyewitnesses without warning, even if they were ordinary uninvolved people. Hence, Haruaki's group did not dare make a reckless move even after reaching a place where they could see the school gates. Cautiously, they waited for an opportunity without any people around—But there was no need to do so. From the start, there was not a pedestrian in sight. Perhaps coincidence or the Knights Dominion had used some kind of cursed tool—Such as a tool for making people avoid the school unless they had particular business, a tool with the kind of power to drive humans away.

Regardless of this speculation's correctness, the truth was that there was no one in front of the school gates to begin with.

Normally, it would not be strange for students to be leaving school at this time. However, let alone pedestrians, there was not a single student before the school gates. Silently spreading was a space with a bizarre sense of bleakness and rejection hanging in the air.

Haruaki's group walked forward with apparent resolve on their faces. The school's iron-barred gates were shut tightly. Having been destroyed by Lilyhowell several months earlier, they were recently repaired and brand new.

"I somehow get the feeling that the school gates will end up destroyed again..."

Konoha searched for nearby presences while continuing to approach the school gates. Then she frowned—At the same time, Fear noticed too. Something was entangled on the inner side of the iron bars. Haruaki also tilted his head and said:

"Konoha, what's that?"

"Looks like... barbed wire, but why is it set up on the inside...?"

Just as Konoha described, the inside could be seen through the gaps between the iron bars—in other words, the side facing the school—where a single barbed wire was hanging. The wire was thin and old. If used to fortify the school gates, it was not going to have much of an effect.

Without lowering her guard towards the surroundings, Konoha carefully reached towards the iron bars.

"Just as expected, the gates can't be opened... So, let me break the area near the lock."

"Hold on, Konoha, all the people have been taken hostage... I don't want to cause a commotion. If the lock breaks, anyone patrolling would see it immediately. Is there no way to enter more discreetly?"

"Indeed, there is no need for Muramasa-sama to trouble herself. Why walk through the front gates lawfully when all you need is to traverse this wall? First, allow me to—"

Kotetsu took a decisive leap at the school wall while speaking. Although the wall was several meters high, it posed little hindrance for a superhuman body. However—

"Nnnguh!"

"Huh? W-What happened?"

Kotetsu's body halted suddenly in the air just as he was about to fly over the wall, then he fell to the ground in an unnatural posture. For some reason, he was covering his nose a little tearfully.

"Kotetsu, could it be that—"

"Yes. It seems... There is an invisible wall there."

Kotetsu was replying in a slightly mumbling voice. Konoha suddenly narrowed her eyes.

"Perhaps... The current situation has developed beyond the point where we can afford to care about causing a commotion. I shall test out a spot as inconspicuous as possible..."

Konoha extended her index finger at an iron bar and stroked lightly. Then her gaze turned even harsher when she moved her finger away.

"Impossible to cut. Unbelievably, my blade did not even produce the slightest scratch."

"Then that means the lock over there can't be broken either."

Kirika concluded with a frown and Konoha nodded gravely.

"Indeed it is impossible. The same as for Kotetsu just now. This can only be some sort of power at work."

"The possible candidate at hand being... that barbed wire."

"Yes."

Konoha slowly reached her hand towards the gap between iron bars and tried to touch the barbed wire hanging on the other side. However, her hand was blocked from entering the gap by something, halting her.

"It's like some sort of invisible wall... The same obstruction that Kotetsu met just now? Of course, it feels impossible to cut too."

"Absolutely ridiculous... A Wathe that prevents physical intrusion? If that Wathe really is this barbed wire... and suppose this wire has encircled the entire school..."

Just as Kirika whispered, the barbed wire was not hanging only on the inner side of the school gates. It apparently followed the surrounding walls and continued to extend.

"Kotetsu."

"This is a wall yet not a wall. Truth be told, it feels the same as the invisible wall just now. My blade cannot pierce through either... If one intends to break the wall in an attempt to invade, this method will likely run into trouble."

This time, Kotetsu did not jump. Instead, he touched the surrounding walls with his hands and spoke with a scowl.

"H-Hold on, now that you mention it..."

Haruaki remarked with a face filled with surprise.

Fear was the same. She felt shocked and terrified.

Unable to break the lock. Unable to open the gates. Unable to go over the wall. Unable to break the wall either.

This, these things meant—

"Forget about saving everyone... We can't even enter the school...?"

Kirika, Konoha and Kotetsu.

All of them could only stare at the school gates in silence.

They really wanted to deny but could not find any words to deny. That was what their gazes were saying.

(Ooh, ah...)

Fear could not help but direct her invisible gaze towards the same direction.

Even with an invisible wall, the view was not blocked. Hence, they could see the school building, where they attended classes every day, on the other side of the school gates' iron bars. Fear felt a certain emotion surge in her heart the instant she saw the school building.

—It truly dawned upon her that the students were right there.

The students, same as usual, inside the school, same as usual.

Yet in an extraordinary state.

(Clearly... They must be rescued...!)

A sense of powerlessness rose in her heart. Pathetically. Massively. Despairingly.

No—It had been like this for a while now. It was the same as during Pendragon's battle against Haruaki's group.

She must stay like this.

Power... Perhaps it might hurt Haruaki again. Clearly she wanted to protect him, but power had forgotten this fact. Hence, all she could do was tremble—

(Powerlessness...)

Since things would end up this way in any case, she would have done this from the beginning had she known earlier.

That was what she thought.

Because—Everything happening before her eyes currently was all her fault.

Had she powerlessly and obediently allowed Peavey to destroy her in the very beginning, perhaps the Knights Dominion would not have pushed further. Honatsu would not need to risk his life for Indulgence Disks or even go through a sex change to evade pursuers. There were many more. Aiko would not have been sent to hunt her down. Nor would she end up in a coma. There were Yume, Lilyhowell and many more—

Just at this moment—

"So... What to do...?"

She heard a calm voice and the touch of a palm. She looked in surprise to see that Haruaki had crouched down and placed his hand on her corner to pat gently. He seemed like he was no longer in shock and was starting to ponder what to do next.

But immediately, he went "ow" feebly, his patting rhythm became irregular and his face twisted momentarily. This was probably subconscious. He was patting her with his left hand—the left hand bearing emptiness and pain, impossible to turn back to the way it was, standing as evidence of her sin.

Pretending nothing had happened and switching to his right hand, Haruaki began to pat in a lively rhythm again.

Then he shifted his gaze slightly away from the gates.

"What's on your mind? It feels like you're thinking about something weird."

"..."

When she kept silent, Haruaki deliberately turned his lips into a frown and lightly applied more force in his right hand. Instead of patting, he switched to pressing with a twisting motion. Then with a wry smile, he said:

"At least say something. Weren't you talking to Kuroe just now? Since I can't see your face, at least let me hear your voice, or else I'll worry... Okay?"

She gave up and sighed, responding to his demand.

"Nothing... I'm not thinking of anything."

"Really? That's fine. But if you come up with some kind of solution, please tell us too."

Too difficult. Currently, her head was filled with pessimistic notions such as "if only I didn't exist from the start" or "if only I were powerless to let others destroy me"—How could she possibly think of solutions?

Clearly, she was thinking "perhaps it's not too late" constantly. Indeed. Powerless as she was, she should act powerless accordingly, as long as she was handed over to the Knights Dominion, perhaps—No wait, it probably would not work. Their target was no longer her alone but probably included Konoha and Kotetsu too. By this point, her disappearance would not be enough. She had missed her chance. She knew she should have from the beginning...

"Hey~ You're giving off weird vibes again."

Knock knock. This time, Haruaki used his fist to hammer a corner of her cube as though knocking on a door.

Haruaki. Haruaki. Clearly she had said nothing and was not in human form, but to think he could see through her thoughts. Was he an esper? Or did this imply he understood her so much? Always keeping her in his thoughts so single-mindedly?

"Also... Once you're tired of this, you're welcome to change back to your original appearance any time. After all, clothes can be bought anywhere."

Original appearance? Which one did he mean?

So happy. But she could no longer... Ahhh, what should she do—?

"But... to be honest, what should we do?"

"Yes, if we stay here, chances of the Knights Dominion discovering us will just keep increasing. Standing here stupidly is a waste of time and also absolutely ridiculous... Let's retreat first?"

"Wait, Muramasa-sama, I still have not swung my blade at full force. If I try to break through seriously, maybe the outcome might be different, it is worth trying—"

Just at that moment—

Konoha and Kotetsu suddenly stopped talking and rapidly spun around.

Fear also noticed after a moment's delay.

The figures who had appeared behind them.

Seeing that—Fear understood. *That time* was starting again.

In other words, the time for her to hope for powerlessness yet regret her inability to act.

"Oh my~ What a great crisis~ Although someone weak like Satsuko can't help at all, if only there was a way to rescue these students safely."

"Although to be blunt, this has nothing to do with us..."

It was also what these two arrivals looked forward to as part of the process in their quest for strength.

Time to fight.

Part 6

Satsuko was dressed in a sailor-style school uniform as usual with pouch at her waist. Fourteen was wrapped in a cape, wearing tall boots.

Haruaki stared at the two of them warily and entered a combat stance. There was no choice. Considering the organization they belonged to, this was only natural— Then he looked around. Were they here? Had they come?

But Satsuko waved her hands hastily.

"Oh no~ Satsuko has nothing to do with the Commander's target~ Satsuko didn't come here to help the Commander, so please don't worry. By the way, Kuroe-san isn't here! Awwww, but you guys won't believe what someone like Satsuko says, right? Satsuko understands..."

"There's no way we can trust you completely. Aren't you two really intimate?"

"That's completely separate~ Rather, although this isn't something that someone like Satsuko can say, Satsuko is very against the idea of using brute force to make a girl yours! The only girls who can be taken by force are the lowest trash, girls with no strength, no willpower and no value, like Satsuko!"

Satsuko pouted slightly, saying incomprehensible things that one could not tell if it counted as self-abuse. But purely judging from her face, she did not seem to be lying.

Haruaki felt slightly relieved. Just as he was about to release his tightly clenched fist...

However, he had forgotten.

Although they had only fought once at the pool and never again—It did not mean that these two had changed their ways.

As a member of the Draconians, their lifestyle of doing anything at all costs to become strong, that could not possibly change.

"So... Why are you two doing here?"

"Eh? Oh my, Konoha-san... Do you really need to ask? Although someone weak like Satsuko might only be a nuisance, Satsuko has finally obtained a weapon of choice, so sorry, please fight Satsuko in a match!"

Satsuko smiled happily.

Then she drew out a sword from the scabbard hanging at her waist, opposite her pouch. It was a very slender sword with a familiar appearance. Konoha's gaze suddenly showed turbulence.

"I remember it... «Karma Speed»! Why is it in your hands!?"

"Satsuko made a deal with Sleif-san, in exchange for that *spear*. Because that spear seemed very weak as a weapon~"

These words were impossible to ignore. Standing on the side, Kirika instantly flew into a rage and roared:

"You were the one who hid it!? Truly, this is... absolutely ridiculous! It's all because you gave that spear to the Knights Dominion! Have you any idea how serious the situation is...!?"

"Satsuko don't know~ Because Satsuko is very weak, in order to get strong, there's no extra energy to think about unnecessary things. Sorry for Satsuko being so willful~"

"There's no need to apologize, Satsuko. These people should already this is who were are. Bluntly stated, those who forgot are at fault."

Fourteen stood confidently next to Satsuko, her face covered by a veil, a cape on her back, her chest bound in strips of fabric resembling *sarashi*. Blue ghostlights were already flying around in irregular orbits.

"«Coonsberry's Haunted House of Death on Fourteenth Avenue»—Do we need to fight you again? Truth be told, it is a waste of energy. Have you forgotten how you were floored when sparring against Muramasa-sama and myself?"

"Now... Things have changed. This is not about *me*, this is *us* now, Nagasone Kotetsu!"

"Oh? Then allow me to confirm!"

Kotetsu bared his fangs and grinned maliciously, charging forward. Ghostlights blinking and flashing, Fourteen swiftly grabbed the broom that appeared from the bright light. It was a fortified object taken out from her body, the cursed house.

The broom clashed violently with the tiger claw, producing a crisp noise that did not sound like impacts between wood and the human body.

Konoha glanced at Haruaki over her shoulder, sighed then took a step forward.

"—Seeing as it is a match, it means that you have no interest in Haruaki-kun and the others, is that correct? That goes the same for the square paperweight over there. No helping it, I shall answer your challenge."

"Sigh~ It's quite a shame that it's not possible to fight Fear-san, but it'd be a waste to consume all the pleasure in one go~ Anyway, no problem! By the way, this tag team match up really is the same as when we sparred at Nirushaaki-senpai's place before. It would be utter humiliation if you end up getting killed by weak little Satsuko who lost so badly back then, so sorry, please try your best this time—!"

"Sigh... Regrettably, I believe the trick is to not try too hard."

While saying that, Konoha slowly advanced without attacking at high speed—

Indeed, the sword's secret had already been revealed. Konoha was probably trying to emulate Pendragon's fighting style from last time. Although she could not reach the same level as him, Konoha should be able to perform similar martial arts. Perhaps a simple throw would suffice, because Konoha was capable of cutting while in a hold. In any case, all she needed to do was avoid executing attacks whose speed would get absorbed.

Konoha closed in slowly. Satsuko backed away while frowning, trying hard to keep a certain distance.

"Oh~ Satsuko supposes that's true~ The cat's out of the bag... Awwww."

"Rubbish, did you really think you could win with a hand-me-down?"

Konoha said with a cold expression. But in contrast, Satsuko replied with a courteous smile:

"Yes. *Because Sleif-san was alone, but we are not... Fourt!*"

"Understood!"

Fourteen pulled back greatly from her fight against Kotetsu. Brooms could not withstand consecutive tiger-clawed strikes and she had already pulled out new brooms and pieces of timber repeatedly, resisting Kotetsu through a strategy of quantity over quality. As a result, when she retreated far back, Haruaki was expecting her to pull out some kind of new weapon for close quarters combat from the magic circle traced out by ghostlights—But that did not happen.

"«Polter»... «Geist»!"

Out appeared from the air were bricks, ammunition for long range combat instead.

Without hesitation, Fourteen shot the bricks at maximum speed—

Towards Satsuko.

"What!?"

"«Geist»! «Geist»! «Geist»!"

Fourteen did not stop, going further to shoot bricks, dishes and small pieces of wood in quick succession.

Using «Karma Speed», Satsuko blocked all the objects flying at her like bullets. The projectiles made contact unnaturally as though sucked by the blade, then fell to her feet with a clatter.

"Huff... Nnnnggga, ahah... F-Feels so good... Ah, hyah!"

Flushed red in the face, Satsuko suddenly made a lewd face and her body shuddered intensely.

Everyone present understood what they were doing.

"No way—you did that on purpose to absorb the *speed*...!"

With drool of pleasure dripping from the corner of her mouth, Satsuko held «Karma Speed» at waist level.

"Huff... Suits us very... well, right? Satsuko has little strength... But with this, whether defense or offense... neither relies on strength. With just Fourt's help... A super finishing move can be instantly executed like this. But this is only because... there is deep trust and silent understanding between Satsuko and Fourt, the most precious partner in the world—This is also the only thing this weak little Satsuko is proud of. So... it suits us very well..."

Then accompanied by the keywords they had heard a long time ago, Satsuko swung the rapier downwards—

"...This is... karma!"

A giant slash was released and given physical form. The asphalt on the ground was ripped up.

Konoha hastily evaded, but suddenly, a dark shadow covered her face. She stared in surprise, only to see Fourteen attacking with two pieces of fortified timber

from above while hiding behind the giant slash released by Satsuko. However, Kotetsu chased Fourteen, jumped and rushed over to get between them in the nick of time, deflecting one piece of timber, but could not evade the second piece which struck him in the shoulder. Wincing, Kotetsu rolled over to the side some distance away—

While Konoha and Kotetsu were regaining balance, the slash produced by «Karma Speed» flew past them and violently struck the metal bars of the school gates that happened to be behind them, causing a loud noise like an explosion.

"Kotetsu! Thank goodness you were there, are you okay?"

"Yes, this is nothing—Although the shoulder has dislocated."

With an audible snap, Kotetsu forced the dislocated joint back into the socket. It was quite a painful sight, but not a critical wound... Probably.

"I should count our blessings that it didn't hit us directly..."

"Yes, but it's also thanks to the attack that we learned something totally distasteful as a result, even though it's useful to us."

Kirika was looking at the iron bars that had taken on the super destructive slash head on.

Completely unharmed after all. Not a single bar was cut, nor were any of them distorted. With a sense of eternity like a painting, sealing the school gates tightly. Impossible to break even with that kind of attack... How secure was the power prevent others from invading this school?

"Satsuko mentioned just now about weak little Satsuko and Fourt's greatest advantage... Satsuko think it's the weak coordination between us. The better we coordinate, the greater our battle power... Call it converting coordination itself into battle power. This is an awesome weapon~"

They were already helpless against the overwhelming firepower of that sword back when Sleif was using it. But because there was time between each attack, they could still manage to find time to discuss countermeasures.

But the case was different with Satsuko and Fourteen. The two of them were able to absorb speed in a self-sufficient manner.

If given such a powerful weapon along with the ability to fire in succession—

How horrifying a threat would that be...?

Haruaki gulped. Right now, the Satsuko and Fourteen standing before them were definitely different from that time at the pool. Indeed—They were even stronger than back then.

Next—

Insurmountable obstacles appeared one after another.

"Oh my~ An audience has arrived."

Satsuko remarked with her head tilted.

Naturally, Haruaki saw as well. As much as he did not want to see.

—Behind the school gates' iron bars.

A petite maiden knight was standing there, wearing a visor-like helmet.

Part 7

Within her field of view too, Fear was watching that girl slowly walk up to the iron bars of the school gates.

She stopped before the gates. Naturally, she did not even touch the bars or the barbed wire.

By the time Fear realized, Sleif's figure was no longer alone there.

One after another, similarly dressed knights appeared, standing in a row behind her.

Staring at them from behind her helmet, Sleif reached into her front pocket and fished out something. A new weapon—No, it was apparently just a cellphone.

"...They are just outside the gates. Lead a team back immediately."

She swiftly put away her cellphone after talking briefly. Something did not feel right. Fear's thoughts seemed to be onto something—But her mind was too occupied to think deeply.

Then Sleif finally spoke to Haruaki's group through the bars.

"Let me state for the record, entering is impossible no matter what you try. But even so, there is no reason to let you lot, reeking of curses, damage this place unchecked—Be gone. If any of you dare touch this entrance with your hand, we will kill the students inside here."

"Gah... Judging from how matter-of-factly you speak, that is really this Wathe's power? Absolutely ridiculous..."

"Indeed, this is an absolutely ridiculous and lowly Wathe, «Auschwitz-Birkenau»—A product of human malice. Once encircled by this Wathe, no one may enter or leave anymore. Give up."

"You expect us to simply go 'Okay, understood'...!?"

Konoha glared sharply beyond the bars, but now was not the time to be focused there. Satsuko pouted and said: "Muu~ Satsuko doesn't mind if the audience increases, but it's a bit much if the chatting gets in the way... Hmm?"

Just at this moment—

A sound.

A faint, rhythmic sound from something getting compressed.

It was gradually approaching.

The knights in formation behind Sleif instantly moved, a bit stiff and tense throughout their bodies. They parted to the sides, leaving a central space.

Sleif turned away from the gates, now showing her side to Haruaki's group—

Then she knelt down on the spot. All the other knights followed suit.

"Oh my, that's... Hmm~ How interesting. Let's take a bit of a break, Fourt."

"Is it okay?"

"Because it's possible to get stronger just by looking at a rare opponent~ That's what the Commander said once. Even without fighting, you should check out their aura and presence first."

Despite hearing the words said between Satsuko and Fourteen, Fear's brain could not process their meaning.

Whatever. She had no spare energy.

More intensely than before, perhaps to the point of violence, her mind was shrouded by a sense of dissonance. It even made her want to vomit. It even felt like something inside her heart was about to be destroyed.

Appearing from between the knights was a wheelchair.

And the person sitting on that wheelchair—

(...!)

An unbelievable feeling. Shock. Sure enough, a sense of dissonance again.

It started the moment she laid eyes on that man.

Surely she would be breaking out in cold sweat were she in human form. Breathing convulsively like a patient, her heart racing irregularly, her vision flashing with vivid colors like some sort of avant-garde painting.

An old Caucasian man. A face covered with wrinkles. Deepset facial features.

His eyes were extremely deepset, giving off a quietness that seemed to see through all creation.

All this was making her tremble. Mercilessly, unmistakably.

(This feeling... What is it...?)

Fear asked herself. However, she felt that the answer was in her heart already.

Hence, she searched deep in her consciousness. Searching, searching, she finally found it.

Ah, right. This feeling was very similar to back then.

Moving to the Yachi house, right when the first commotion ended.

After defeating Peavey, it was when she first laid eyes on an Indulgence Disk for the first time.

The feeling of *recognition*—

(No way... How...?)

She could not understand her feeling. How was she feeling this way? Why?

The sound of the wheelchair's rolling stopped.

In front of the iron bars. The man sitting on the wheelchair had stopped where Sleif had just been standing.

Then he—

Looking at neither Haruaki, nor Konoha, nor Kirika, nor the pair of Satsuko and Fourteen.

Simply staring at her, the cube, he spoke in a calm and low voice:

"Although a foolish act, I shall still speak to you."

"—It has been a long time, Fear-in-Cube. *My daughter of sin.*"

Memories—

Massive waves and turbulence.

Voice. That voice. She had heard it before. Where?

Appearance. That appearance. She had seen it before. Where?

The sense of dissonance, already at its limit, overflowed even more, covering her completely.

"Uwah, ah..."

"Fear!"

Haruaki's worried voice. Many of her body's components were probably popping out on their own in various places. Like incontinence, like vomiting, impossible to control. Unimportant. What was more important lay on the inside. Inside this thing, herself.

Where—somewhere—in the past. But it was not after encountering Haruaki, nor after discovered by Honatsu—It was much farther back... in the past. Indeed.

Memories of screams. The smell of blood. Him, the user. The castle lord, roaring with laughter. On the side—No, even earlier than that, much, much earlier. *Even during the instant when she had come into being—*

She thought...

And remembered.



"Eeeek...!"

Instantly, she cried out pathetically. Impossible to understand. Impossible to acknowledge. Impossible to explain.

Even so, she still understood instinctively, indeed it was like that. Neither a dream, nor an illusion, nor a hallucination. Not a mistaken identity nor a disguise nor someone similar.

Ahhh. Truly.

That man.

That man was—

Haruaki's voice was heard once more.

The voice of Haruaki, the one she loved most. The voice of Haruaki, the one whom she wanted to stay by his side forever.

However, that voice was now trembling in fear.

"W-Who are you? What have you done to Fear!?"

"Who am I? Truly a foolish question—"

The man spoke simply but with great weight, introducing his name.

"I am Trinac Agana, Lord of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion."

"...!"

She could feel Haruaki and the others gasping. In contrast, the man remained completely unfazed. Still resting the edge of his face on his hand, supported by his arm on the wheelchair's armrest, he continued:

"Next—What have I done to Fear-in-Cube? Another foolish question. The answer is simple."

He did not look shift his gaze away.

Slightly narrowing those eyes, it seemed like he was examining her intently...

And also pitying her.

"—I created her. Originally a foolish alchemist in the past, I created her, that unfortunate and loathsome tool of torture and execution."

Chapter 3 - The Rejected Daughter of Sin / "Child x Captive x Cacophonous"

Part 1

A brief respite.

As soon as he stopped moving, Zenon threw three knives at him. He casually deflected two with his hand and left the third to Riko's movable armor protecting him.

"Good grief..."

"Hmm! Are you actually tired~? That's so rare!"

"Not my body, but if anything, I'm mentally tired. It feels like being forced to solve puzzles the whole time."

Pendragon shrugged and replied, looking at Ganon before him. She was covered in sweat, breathing slightly faster, but the precision of her movements remained unchanged. Slightly swaying, the sword tip waved back and forth.

Pendragon grinned.

"Houjyou... You've actually been training, haven't you? This isn't a level of skill achievable by someone who had neglected martial arts for years after deserting the Draconians."

"...Actually, I have been neglecting martial arts."

"Probably until recently? I also know that you have always been doing what you need to do, Onee-sama."

Saying that, Zenon took out new knives to hold between her fingers, preparing to throw them. Ganon glanced at her and sighed.

"Sigh... She was called Kokoro Pentangeli, right? After that incident with her, I started practicing a bit."

"Oh, that name sure brings back memories. I haven't heard from her for over six months already. Is she well? Or has she died?"

"Quite well, one could say."

The old friend was standing somewhere out of Zenon and Ganon's way when he spoke. Pendragon could not be certain but believed he was probably not lying. She was talented enough to be one of the «High Singles»—Since she was still alive, surely she would return to the dragon's path one day.

"So... After fighting Kokoro Pentangeli, did it make you remember something?"

"Remember... Remember something? Perhaps. Because I've neglected martial arts all this time, it felt surprisingly hard to perform when I picked up a sword again after so long. To be honest, the slightest misstep then and an irrevocable outcome might have resulted."

Between lethargic breaths, she continued:

"...Even though this sword style is clearly so utterly meaningless, the old man still taught it to me just in case. However—if that just-in-case really did arrive but I

failed to do anything, now that would be truly meaningless... That's what occurred to me after the battle."

"Because now that Old Man Long is not around, you're the only one left who can use the Void Night Sword... Are you thinking it would be a shame to let it go to waste?"

"Roughly something like that."

Pendragon's lips curled in a grin while he simply thought to himself: "Honestly?" Indeed, it was one of the reasons, but he did not think that was all. He recalled the scenes he had seen many times in the past when she was learning the Void Night Sword from Long. He recalled her gaze at the time. The emotions in her gaze when she was looking at her master, who was old enough to be her father or even grandfather. Excitement, fear, admiration, a sense of mission to respond to his expectations, as well as—

(...Her taste for older men still hasn't changed, right? Oh my, what a shame.)

Well, whatever. No matter what the reason, now that she was seriously trying to stop him...

He decided to confirm again.

Seizing a gap in the conversation, Pendragon closed in with natural and smooth flowing motions. Ganon was completely unfazed by his sudden action.

Controlling the timing of attacks was, in other words, "opportunity" which was within her realm of response.

"Granaury, shrink one millimeter."

"Affirmative, master."

The blade on the back of his right hand retracted slightly. Instantly, he could feel the blade's power growing more powerful. The shorter the distance to the enemy, the greater the power, this was Granaury's curse.

With multiplied power in Granaury's blade attached to his fist, Pendragon punched as hard as he could towards Ganon. She swiftly turned and made her body stumble clumsily as though she had snapped at the waist. But that clumsy movement was a uniquely correct choice for extending the time for which "instant death would occur unless this was done." The sword held in Ganon's hand was already making contact with Granaury. Considering the totality of Granaury's destructive power, it would not be surprising if that ordinary sword shattered instantly. However, through Ganon's meticulous shifting of her center of gravity and high-level techniques for inertial neutralization, Granaury was parried to the side as though sucked by her sword, drawn to a location different from where the attack was originally targeting—Achieving a similar effect as «Karma Speed» through pure skill alone.

Pendragon did not force a counterattack, allowing his fist to be deflected towards the ground. Then he deliberately allowed his fist to smash into the ground. The delivered impact caused the ground surface to explode. Amidst the cloud of dirt and dust, he made a flying kick. Riko's armor moved swiftly to reinforce his kick, increasing the armor's thickness to the point that the opponent might break their arm if she tried to block recklessly or attack his leg. However, Ganon evaded with a backflip, resulting in a fluttering of her skirt. Then the battle resumed.

"Haha~ Is that black lace? Nice panties. You've become a mature woman."

"Don't sneak a peek without permission. I'm charging you a fee now."

"No problem, I'll pay up. What forms of payment can I choose? ...Oh."

In the next second, a knife flew straight at his eyeball. After he dodged lightly, Zenon, the thrower of the knife, narrowed her eyes and glared at him, saying:

"How repulsive and nauseating, to hear comments about my family of such an obscene nature."

"As a businessman, I'm actually quite curious whether the price she demands is reasonable or not."

Zenon glared viciously at Gabriel. Pendragon laughed, his shoulders shaking lightly.

This felt so nostalgic.

Gabriel used to be ranked second in the Draconians. The Houjyou sisters, always following him loyally, were akin to his disciples. To be honest, starting way back—They were just like family.

But how far did this distinction extend? As Gabriel's best friend, best rival and competitor, what about Pendragon? After sparring with the sisters a few times as a way to pass time, he had started to chat with them like Gabriel. Despite their differences in power level, it was still a relationship allowing them to joke around with one another, spar and say whatever they wanted without reservation. The non-human ones also stood on the side, laughing together, frowning or pouting—Liz who used to be Gabriel's and Granaury who used to be Long's. The two of them were very similar in various ways. Deep friendship, birds of a feather—They were even alike in ways they should not. Hence, Liz's gaze remained focus on one person the whole time, whereas Granuary never stared.

Ahhh, perhaps it was not just the Houjyou sisters. In that space, perhaps there were brothers and sisters alike. Perhaps including himself, they were like a family—

(...It's all in the past, anyway. I can't keep reminiscing just because I miss it.)

Pendragon warned himself and shook his head lightly.

After a sigh, he renewed his focus on reality before his eyes.

"What should I say? I'm finally understanding what this is about. Using the earlier analogy, your dragonslayer sword won't kill me. *You possess neither the intent nor the actual skill required to kill me.* That's a fake trenchant blade, even if it carries the significance of being the one and only existence that can resist the strongest person."

"Kill you? Haha... Don't get alarmist on me, that goes without saying."

Sarcastically, exhaustedly, Ganon twisted the corners of her lips to say:

"Forget about killing, I am a goddess of healing, you know? Because I'm the school physician."

"Ha..."

Pendragon laughed wryly in exasperation while whispering at the same time:

"Riko, concentrate on strengthening the springs on the legs. Prepare to jump."

"Tsk, no helping it..."

Centered around the legs, «Corpse Armor Rikongarowa»'s armor began to shift positions and rearrange itself. Through overlapping and rebounding, the armor strengthened the movements of the leg muscles. Then immediately, Pendragon jumped high up and backwards—

He landed on the roof of the Yachi house.

Gazing down at Ganon and the rest, he said:

"I guess by now, I've tired of playing with my old friends... There's really no more time to waste with you. You've also managed to fully achieve the task of buying time, right? I'll let you off this time. Dismissed."

They were ordinary humans after all without the supernatural powers of Wathes. In other words, Ganon and Zenon were physically unable to reach the roof in a single leap. He should have done this earlier—But he could not help immersing himself in the nostalgia of fighting them.

He was just about to jump again, intending to exit the house's premises in a single bound—

"Hey... Let's continue that cliched and embarrassing subject of the dragonslayer. If my sword cannot kill you—"

Those eyes of hers, looking up towards him—

They were filled with lethargy and drowsiness as always—However, they were also as sharp as fine needles.

"Max-kun, that's only because you aren't a dragon yet. Conversely... If you become a dragon, perhaps I will be able to kill you."

"Haha~ That would be more exciting. I'll look forward to it."

He did not look away.

After a long silence—

"...You still refuse to give up?"

"Of course. This is my only current goal. By obtaining Ningyouhara Kuroe, I will truly become the strongest dragon. That is what I live for and the way I've lived all this time—Having forsaken this way of life, you lot cannot stop me."

Finally, he saw wavering flash across the silent Ganon's eyes.

Pendragon applied force through his legs, breaking the Yachi house's roof underfoot as he took a leap.

Flying through midair, then came a feeling of descent.

Even if he were to become a true dragon, wings probably would not sprout out of his back.

He felt a bit disappointed about that.

In front of Zenon...

The older sister exhaled forcefully while her shoulders heaved up and down.

"Haha... Hear that? Zenon... Using his full power to make a young girl his property, to think that's the way to become a dragon? I knew it... It's too unseemly..."

Then her knees collapsed as though her legs suddenly lost strength.

"Onee-sama!"

"There, this is the least I could do."

While Zenon was rushing over in panic, the superintendent caught Ganon in his arms just as she was about to fall on the ground. Likewise, he was sighing beneath his gas mask.

"You should rest for a while. Right now... Even if you chase after him, it won't do any good."

"Yes~ ...Ahhh, honestly... So tired..."

At this moment, in a fluid manner that made one suspect how familiar she was with this, a long-haired woman (strictly speaking, perhaps "woman" was debatable) swiftly crawled out from under the eaves.

"I was being considerate by hiding and not get in your way, but it's time for me to enter the stage now. Although the living room is a wreck, the other parts of the house should be okay, so you can come in to rest."

"Thank you so much. Before that, the fallen knights here need to be taken care of first."

"Yes. As much as I don't want to involve others, I guess I must count on the help of some friends dealing in underground businesses~"

"I'll also use connections on my side."

Honatsu and the superintendent started to discuss how to clean up the aftermath. Zenon took Ganon from the superintendent's hands.

"Ow~ ...Even saying 'so tired' is tiring~ ...What should I do?"

"You can remain quiet and not say a single word. You can also go to sleep directly."

"Oh, really? Yay~ Today is a weekday, but I can skip work and take a nap, that's so awesome... Zzzzz..."

Ganon instantly leaned her entire weight on Zenon after closing her eyes and began to breathe smoothly and regularly.

She had been overexerting herself, probably. Facing off against the strongest man. Neither winning nor losing, a technique that relied excessively on deceit and obfuscation. Miraculously good fortune, combined with the opponent's complacency, carelessness, underestimation of his enemy... This result was obtained precisely by gathering all of these elements. This must not be forgotten.

Hence, conversely—

While gazing at the face of her older sister sleeping as though in a coma, Zenon continued to ponder.

If she were to face him in battle next time...

Surely—The result was going to be different.

Part 2

Haruaki felt his face shake on its own as though it were laughing.

"You... What are you talking about? It doesn't make any sense. You... created Fear?"

"Indeed."

Behind the gates, the man sitting in the wheelchair—the Knights Dominion Lord who called himself Trinac Agana—nodded without smiling at all.

"Absolutely ridiculous. Fear was created during the time of the Inquisition—That's already centuries ago. Ordinary humans cannot possibly live that long. Or are you a Wathe?"

"Lowly and deplorable peasants! How dare you keep addressing our lord directly as 'you,' what utter insolence!"

Turning her helmet towards them, Sleif scolded but the Dominion Lord raised his hand lightly to stop her.

"Foolish action—They are merely ignorant children. No matter."

"...Yes, my lord."

Sleif nodded reluctantly. Then the Dominion Lord cast his gaze towards them again.

"I am no foolish Wathe. I am human."

While keeping Satsuko and Fourteen under watch, Konoha spoke:

"Fair enough. It is already surprising that a cursed tool could become a knight. I doubt if the organization could be established if even the leader were one as well. Since you are human, it means that what you just claimed, that you created Fear-san, was a lie after all? Ordinary humans cannot possibly live for multiple centuries."

"This is a *curse*."

Haruaki's group gasped in great surprise. Just by one sentence, the truth was conveyed.

The Dominion Lord turned his head lightly as though gesturing towards what was behind him.

Behind the wheelchair he was seated.

Planted upright was a rod-shaped object. It seemed familiar in appearance—

"«Dieu le veut» curses its owner with death as soon as one steps out of the defined territory. At the same time, so long as the owner remains within the territory, it will confer eternal longevity. It will force the owner to remain as the land's king forever."

"What...!?"

Haruaki was rendered speechless. Indeed, given that type of curse—Everything then made sense. However, did this man truly accept that curse willingly to live all this time? Living all this time till now, without taking a step outside his territory, without aging at all?

—It really was true, Haruaki thought.

He could only believe.

...After seeing Fear's appearance—shaking with clattering, various components popping out from her body, her breaths sounding like suffocated sobbing and vomiting.

"Th-Then you really..."

"It was my foolish act from the past. In search of authority, wealth and fame, I created numerous objects at the orders of nobles. One of them—rather, the most abominable yet outstanding masterpiece I created using the most time, labor and skills—was Fear-in-Cube."

"B-But... Why did someone like you found an organization like the Knights Dominion...!?"

"Foolish question. My past self did not know this was a sin, but now I know. This is the answer."

Kirika groaned after asking her question. The Dominion Lord answered simply. Then drumming his fingertips on the wheelchair's armrest, he said:

"Things that knows only to hurt, injure, kill and violate human beings, should they exist? No, they should not. Because they are cursed. Only hurting, injuring, killing, violating human beings, should they exist? No, they should not. Because they will continue to hurt, injure, kill and violate human beings."

"Ooh... Ah..."

Fear groaned. She was listening even though she did not want to listen.

"What have my creations done? What did they represent? When I became old and authority, wealth and fame were no longer useful, I finally understood. Then I realized my sin—namely, the foolish behavior of spreading curses all over the world."

The wrinkled face exhaled a sigh. Still unchanging in expression, his face was very calm.

"Hence, I vowed to use what little remained of my life to rectify my sin. To destroy all cursed tools in the world... In other words, Wathes. To gather and destroy all Wathes, regardless they were created by my hand or not."

Then during his wanderings across the world, he presumably obtained «Dieu le veut». Gathering and destroying all Wathes in the world was undoubtedly beyond a single man's ability. Hence, he assembled like-minded comrades to create a "domain" to establish a organization whose sole goal was gathering and destroying Wathes—

Haruaki moved his stiff throat, only succeeding in forcing out dry laughter.

"Haha... Then several hundred years later, things turned out like this? The scale is too great, frankly speaking, it doesn't feel real to me at all. It's like listening to a fairy tale."

"—Precisely. The Knights Dominion was very weak in the beginning."

The Dominion Lord seemed to narrow his eyes slightly. He turned his gaze towards Sleif who was waiting on the side.

She looked up with her visored helmet to face the Dominion Lord's gaze.

"Through the long passage of time, although the quantity and quality of knights have changed—Only the Dominion's true nature has remained constant and unwavering."

"Precisely."

The Dominion Lord's voice carried a slight increase in emphasis. Not due to anger or excitement, but it seemed more like he was ruminating his own words. The pressure exerted by his voice seemed to leave definite weight in the listener's heart.

"We of the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion will gather and destroy Wathes, whether past, present, or henceforth. This is undoubtedly true *justice*."

Haruaki glared at him and retorted:

"That's really something to decide on your own. I do happen to know what you guys have been doing till now. Honestly, it's impossible to agree that it's justice...!"

"No, considering the tragedies born from curses, there is no question that we are *right*. You people should know, shouldn't you? The foolish behavior brought by Wathes and the consequences of foolish behavior."

"That's..."

Of course he knew. The results caused by cursed tools were bizarre and terrifying, disrupting the lives of the owners and the people around them. However...

Haruaki was also aware of what the Knights Dominion had been doing all this time.

Peavey Barowoi. The knight who used to be Aiko's owner. The knights who had appeared at the school's welcoming festival. Neto the Avenger. Lilyhowell

Kilmister. They had committed numerous atrocities that were utterly inhumane. Things were the same now as well, to think they would seize completely innocent students to serve as hostages...

"Even if curses did not exist in this world, people will still murder. But curses will affect curses. There is meaning in stopping these chain reactions, so as to reduce the total number of future deaths."

"But there are also those who are working hard to stop themselves from letting such things happen!"

"In the meantime, people still die. Truly naive optimism. Your—"

Lifting a finger, the Dominion Lord pointed at Haruaki.

As though pursuing the issue, as though condemning, as though accusing.

"Your fingers were only lost due to a curse left to roam free out of optimism, weren't they?"

"...!"

Haruaki groaned and hid his left hand behind his right. He hid the amputation wound that was suddenly as painful as though struck by lightning because he had subconsciously clenched his fist tightly.

He really did not want to hear it from this man. What do you know? —Haruaki thought.

At the same time, a strange clattering of sounds were heard. Fear's body of steel was shaking genuinely, so dramatically that one could not help but wonder if she might scatter into pieces.

"Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhhhh...!"

"Fear!"

The words, coming from the man who allegedly created her in the past, also reached her ears. A gaze of pity and regret was cast upon her.

Probably due to hearing her cry out in pain, the Dominion Lord addressed Fear directly next:

"Fear-in-Cube, your existence is my greatest pain. Perhaps refusing to let anyone else take his precious belonging, that castle lord hid you during his downfall. You could not be found even after his execution, remaining missing over the long years—You are precisely the pinnacle of my folly and greatest taint."

Ahhh, what a great shock this produced. Her creator, a being akin to God to her. A reunion after centuries with someone akin to her father. The words uttered from his mouth were—

Unmistakably, rejecting her existence.

"Wait for me all you like. Once the Second Knights Dominion is completely established, I will surely gather and destroy you. This is my responsibility as your creator."

"Ahhh, ooh, ah... N-No, don't..."

Fear moaned to form words, trying to resist with her entire body and mind. However—

"Foolish opinion. You have no right to refuse. Since you are unable to understand, as the father who created you, I shall tell you in no uncertain terms—"

Don't say it, Haruaki thought, but he was unable to stop the Dominion Lord from continuing to speak. If the Dominion Lord was right in front of him, without the cold bars of the gate blocking him, no matter how many knights there were beside the Dominion Lord, even if it meant rushing in punching and kicking, Haruaki would still try to stop him.

However, those words were mercilessly delivered into Fear's constantly trembling ears.

"You should not have been born in this world."

"Ahhh—Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Fear listened to her own screaming. A world without color. Her field of view shook, causing nausea. Her ears were ringing unpleasantly. However, only the voices nearby could be heard clearly. Including what she did not want to hear, and her own murmurs.

Sure enough, the fact of her existence itself, was it a mistake?

The fact she had thought she could do something, was it a mistake?

In the end, she was ultimately the cube created for torture and execution. These immoral uses were not meant to exist. But at least, it was true that someone had created her out of anticipation for making use of her functions. However, if the one who created her rejected her existence... Indeed, that meant that she was undoubtedly something that should not exist in the first place. It meant that before making use of her functions, the root of her being, the origin of all causality for her as a tool, should not have existed in the first place.

A mistake starting from the very first step. She had simply failed to realize it until now.

Not supposed to exist, not allowed to exist.

Should not... have been born in this world...

"Ahhhh, ah, ah...!"

Her consciousness was overflowing like hyperventilation. Her thoughts were out of control. About to breakdown. About to breakdown.

She did not want to look at anything, hear anything, or think anything anymore.

Hence, she was unable to resist the onslaught of the second wave.

No, instead, she accepted it willingly—

"Ah..."

Her consciousness suddenly disconnected.

Fear's shuddering body suddenly stopped unnaturally. Silent. No moaning or screaming. Had she fainted?

"You bastard...!"

Haruaki glared at the Dominion Lord furiously, clenching his fist hard.

The Dominion Lord only stared back at him with calm eyes of pity. However, Sleif swiftly stood up from her kneeling position, taking a step forward to come between Haruaki and the Dominion Lord. The iron bars, entwined with the cursed barbed wire, still stood before Haruaki's group. Even with throwing weapons in hand, it was probably impossible to hit him. Did she forbade even murderous gazes from reaching her master?

However, Sleif's action seemed to carry other significance. Haruaki noticed that her eyes beneath the helmet were not directly towards him but further back. Behind him, Satsuko was currently observing the Dominion Lord with interest while muttering quietly to herself.

"Hmm~ This is so deep. With advanced age, gentlemanliness equals or surpasses the Commander in every way... If his strength is also on the Commander's level, perhaps the secret to strength is about gentlemanliness. If Satsuko puts on a fake moustache, perhaps..."

However, instead of addressing Satsuko, Sleif was talking to her surroundings.

"Have you arrived? All humans and Wathes present are enemies. Wipe them out swiftly."

"Satsuko!"

Alarm appeared on Satsuko's face while Fourteen yelled at the same time as the two of them jumped apart in opposite directions. By the time they realized, a number of similarly dressed people were present.

"A detachment... from the Knights Dominion?"

"Speaking of which, she was apparently calling them earlier. I almost forgot."

Haruaki asked quietly and Konoha closed in while answering him.

Of course, Haruaki did not remember their faces clearly, but he gathered the impression that this group was different from the knights who had attacked their home. Was that group still fighting Pendragon? Or had the battle concluded already?

"Satsuko, what's the next move?"

"Right~ Let's practice by watching a group fight. It's the first time after obtaining this «Karma Speed»."

"Understood. But what about them?"

"Let's save the main course to enjoy later. Also, Fear-san cannot fight right now."

Satsuko slowly blocked a knight's attack while looking at Haruaki's group with a smile. Konoha and Kotetsu were likewise intercepting the attacking knights while exchanging brief glances at the same time.

"Is there any point in fighting now, Muramasa-sama?"

"Of course not. The main gates cannot be broken through whereas the enemies are durable pawns. We should regroup."

Konoha and Kotetsu nodded lightly at each other then sent their opponents flying at the same time. Then without following up the attacks, they swiftly turned around.

"Let us retreat for now while leaving those two to handle them, Haruaki-kun!"

"Agreed. Fear-kun also looks very weird... There's no point staying here any longer."

"But..."

Kirika agreed with Konoha and Kotetsu. However, Haruaki was unable to tear his gaze away from the people behind the gates.

The people who had taken the students hostage. The people who intended to completely destroy the Yachi house and this town. The people who rejected Fear's existence on a fundamental level.

Haruaki did not want to agree. He could not agree either. He still had many things he wanted to say, many rebuttals he wanted to offer—

"Tsk... Truth be told, you are man who can't read the situation. Time is of the essence!"

"Uwah!"

Kotetsu forcibly picked him up in his arms, loading him on his shoulder like a sack of rice.

"W-Wait!"

"No."

"That is a bit forceful, but it can't be helped! Let's go!"

"Yes, I'll push Fear-kun!"

The group ran as fast as they could. The knights outside the gates seemed to rush the belligerent Satsuko and Fourteen all at once, leaving only a few to chase Haruaki and friends. Konoha fought and repelled them as necessary.

While on Kotetsu's shoulder, Haruaki saw the final moment.

Behind the gates, Sleif—as well as the Dominion Lord sitting in wheelchair.

They completely lacked the anxiety to hunt them down at all costs, simply showing calm composure.

(Damn it...)

Then Haruaki's group managed to escape the area in front of the school gates.

Haruaki did not want to know at all how many times they had been fleeing today.

Part 3

A so-called secret room naturally referred to a room which others could not find, hence there was no better hiding place. Once hiding inside, it was very hard to be discovered. Although they still held and suppressed their breaths when sensing people outside the door, fortunately, no other people from the Knights Dominion came to the superintendent's office again after the knights had searched the room once.

Hence—Un Izoey finished what she had to do first.

In other words, the promise.

"Mmm-hmm..."

"Oh..."

After Un Izoey finished her explanation, Kana and Taizou were sitting on the floor, their arms crossed, eyes closed, making this sort of humming sound. As for what emotions were occupying their hearts—That would be an unknown for Un Izoey.

She had already said what she needed to say.

Curses and cursed tools. The phenomenon of tools taking on human form after being excessively cursed. The various organizations knowing about curses. One of these organizations had now captured the school. As well as their goal—

Also the fact that there were a number of cursed tools at school in human form.

For the sake of lifting their curses, they had gathered in a certain place in this town.

Mincing no words, there were also Yachi Haruaki and Fear-in-Cube.

"Mumumuu...?"

"Hoo~ Muuuu~..."

Un Izoey knew that the truth was not that easy to accept. When excessively huge unknowns were turned into knowns, people would feel shocked as though their world had changed. Rebuilding a new worldview in their minds would take quite a long time, of course.

However, she believed they would not go as far as to "not believe." Since there was no time for unnecessary explanations, she had asked for Isuzu's assistance to turn back into a bell in front of them before returning to human form again. Although this was a reckless solution, there was definitely nothing more convincing.

(So...)

Just let them digest the information they were fed.

She could only do what was in her power. For the sake of breaking out of this predicament.

"So, what are we doing next? Just hide here the whole time?"

Chihaya was leaning her back against the wall, still dressed in gym clothes. She asked with her arms crossed. Standing by her side, Isuzu smiled at everyone.

"My answer: No. Listening to the conversation between knights, several unknown news became known."

"Oh? You found out something?"

Sovereignty suddenly leaned forward and asked.

"In other words, the person who performed the hypnosis is named Taciturn. Most likely the owner of that voice heard on the public announcement. Also, that woman is currently not inside the school."

"Did she go shopping? I really wish she could've taken us along."

Shiraho remarked sarcastically in her usual displeasure.

"No, the knights also said that this school is currently impossible to get in or out. Probably the power of the Wathe seen on the sports ground, which looks like barbed wire. With this—My question: why is this Taciturn woman outside the school? If an emergency came up, that woman will probably order the hypnotized students to harm themselves."

"You're saying if the silver-haired little girl broke the school wall and appeared, right...? In spite of that, the fact that she still went outside the school means—"

At this point, Chihaya frowned as though realizing something and said:

"It's possible to make hypnotic suggestions from outside the school too...?"

"Or she was outside all along. It is already known that the public announcement system is controlled from the broadcast room. Is there a way to remotely control the announcement system from far away to broadcast your voice?"

"Something like that... can be done in many ways. You can have someone holding a cellphone call her then just point the phone's speaker towards the mic in the broadcast room. But why exactly do it from outside the school?"

"This is still unknown. Maybe it's because of some kind of curse."

In any case, the current problem was—

Un Izoey took out her cellphone from her skirt pocket. There was still no signal.

Just by watching Un Izoey's action of confirming, Chihaya seemed to figure out something. Suddenly gasping, she said:

"As long as this Taciturn woman is still outside—This means that there's definitely some method inside the school to contact outside and vice versa, right? Some method that's unlike our cellphones whose signals are jammed."

"My answer: yes. I guessed the same, suggesting this kind of suggestion."

What excellent power of understanding despite clearly a younger age. If possible, Un Izoey really wanted to recruit Chihaya for the Lab Chief's Nation, but Ueno Kirika would probably kill her if she really did that, so she suppressed the thought.

So, if their guess was correct and the enemy side did have their own communications devices—

"I believe our next target is to contact the outside world again. Since the person able to control students with hypnosis, Taciturn, is not inside the school, taken with the fact that it is impossible to enter or exit the school right now, asking other people outside school to take care of her will be the fastest solution. I also thought about finding the signal jamming device to destroy it, but—"

"It's probably hard to find since things like that can be made very small in the modern age. So rather than finding the device, it's probably more practical to use the enemy's means of communications directly."

"Hmm... If that kind of device really exists, go ahead and try, but we won't be helping. Do you know what it looks like?"

Probably to kill time, Shiraho was combing Sovereignty's hair one moment and straightening out the wrinkles in her maid uniform the next, meanwhile answering indifferently.

"My answer: no. But I think it should not be very complicated."

"Please allow me to ask in fear and trepidation, why is that~?"

"In an emergency situation where orders need to be issued, which requires her to give the hostages hypnotic suggestions, threatening hostages becomes pointless if it takes too much time. It is pointless unless the communication device can be used easily and instantly, I guess this kind of guess."

"I see now~"

"Uh... Something like a special, modified cellphone should be enough, right? Since they prepared the signal jamming after all, all they need to do is set it up to avoid the interference."

Chihaya was speaking in a respectful tone of voice, because she was answering Shiraho as well. On the other hand, Shiraho simply responded coldly: "Oh~ I see."

"Uh... Then who will be holding that special cellphone thing? Someone of a higher position, I guess?"

"The knights just now said something about the three squad leaders being the actual ones to issue hypnosis commands. Also—there should be a detachment with a number of members sent out of the school. I really cannot believe they do not contact those teams at all. Based on that, the people holding means of communications should be higher ranked as expected. Although others might have them too, at least it is certain that targeting a knight squad leaders will not leave us emptyhanded."

"But... those people should be quite strong, right? Will it be okay?"

"Well..."

One could hardly blame Sovereignty for speaking with worry written all over her face. Speaking of knight squad leader rank, they would be on the same level of Lilyhowell. Judging from the fact that Sleif was conversing directly with the Dominion Lord on the sports ground, she might be one of them. In other words—even Un Izoey could not guarantee a victory. Although she was assuming a surprise attack, if the attack failed and the enemy called for reinforcements, the situation would only get more despairing.

Seeing Un Izoey's hesitation, Sovereignty went "Hmm~" and started to contemplate.

"Anyway, all we need is to get a hold of a cellphone carried by a powerful squad leader, right...? Hmm~ If we could come up with a perfect plan..."

After frowning for a while, she suddenly clapped her hands together.

"Shi~ra~ho~!"

She poked the cheek of Shiraho who was focused on removing dirt from the maid outfit's sleeves. Shiraho instantly said with a serious expression:

"I am not going to help, it's too troublesome. You are not allowed to help either, it's too dangerous."

"Eh~ But if this continues, we'll never get home, you know? And I was planning for us to cook curry together tonight."

"..."

"I wanna go home earlier to cook curry with you, Shiraho, then take a bath as usual and go to bed with my body all warm~ Umm... Don't you want that, Shiraho?"

Shiraho sighed deeply and said with a slight pout:

"Seriously... That's so unfair. Using such an adorable look on your face to ask me to indulge you, how could I possibly refuse... Can this be considered the husband ruling the roost?"

"Hmm?"

"...Fine. You're right, this is all for the sake of getting home earlier. Since things need to be done, let's do it."

"Yay~! Shiraho, thank you! That's why I love you so much~!"

Seeing Sovereignty hug Shiraho as hard as she could, Un Izoey relaxed her face.

Then Sovereignty gave a simple explanation of the plan she had thought of. Some parts needed adjustment—But it just might work.

"But please allow me to ask in fear and trepidation, do you know who is a knight squad leader~?"

Sleif instantly surfaced in Un Izoey's mind. But approaching her would incur too high a risk. Not only was she a Wathe but they had met once already, so something unpredictable could arise, hence they must target the other two leaders.

Naturally, Un Izoey had no idea what those two looked like, but—

"Although unknown, they can become known next."

"Oh... How?"

"You're not planning on torture and interrogation, right?"

Chihaya said with a frown.

"That is the last resort. Interrogating a soldier to get information is faster, but I want to avoid a commotion as much as possible."

"Then what will you do?"

Un Izoey nodded and answered seriously:

"Observe. In a hunt, I can tell which is the alpha male in a pack of animals just from observation."

"...Oh, sure."

For some reason, Chihaya was sighing speechlessly.

Finding out by watching was the truth. The alpha males usually had bigger bodies or were followed by many females, so it was clear from a glance.

Although the situation this time was a little different, she should be able to find a way. "Strongest in the group" is something that naturally exuded into the air. The more tension released together, the more obvious it was.

"So, I will search for the squad leader alone first. I will only memorize the appearance first, which means I will hide while searching. This could take some time, up to a few hours depending on conditions. Please hide here quietly."

This mission must not be messed up by impatience. Caution was paramount.

Listening to Chihaya and the others acknowledge understanding one after another, Un Izoey walked to the secret room's exit—

"Uh~ Un-chan? You're going outside?"

"For real? It's very dangerous outside, right?"

Originally humming "hmm" nonstop, Kana and Taizou both looked up to gaze at her.

"No problem, I will pay attention to safety."

Kana and Taizou looked at each other after Un Izoey said that.

"Umm, to be honest, although everything is still beyond my understanding..."

"Yeah~ I've got so much to ask you right now, to confirm. But we can read the current atmosphere after all. What a man of the year needs most is the ability to read moods at all times!"

"Who the heck is the man of the year!? Don't call yourself that on your own!"

Kana smacked Taizou on the shoulder with the bottom of her palm. Then the two of them smiled shyly at the same time but with very serious eyes.

"Well, anyway, that's that. I just want to say one thing—Take care."

"Yeah, that's right, you be careful."

Un Izoey relaxed her expression and nodded lightly. She was very grateful for their genuine feelings of concern.

Then she turned around and resumed walking to the exit.

She did not forget to leave behind the important words:

"I'll be back."

Part 4

Maximilian Pendragon halted his footsteps.

Staring at *that scene*, he cocked his head.

He had walked here simply to eliminate the possibility without getting his hopes up. Rather, one could say he had come here to confirm that nothing had happened. After ordering his subordinates to investigate, visiting this place that was found, then breaking and entering on his own, doing a quick search and rummage, then thinking "Where did she run off to?" before moving onto the next place—That was how he envisaged the process. Originally.

"..."

The sun was setting. The shopping street was quiet all around.

However, the Dan-no-ura beauty parlor in one corner there still had its lights on.

Stuck to the glass door in front of Pendragon was a notice reading "Appointments Only."

Clinging to his hand, Riko exchanged puzzled glances with Granaury on the side.

"No way..."

He walked inside.

It would be a stretch of flattery even if one were to call this place "not very big." Also, *she* was sitting on the innermost chair in the shop.

Talking on the phone. She threw a glance at Pendragon but still kept her cellphone against her ear.

"Yeah, so you guys will return home first? Got it. I heard that Ficchi was quite shocked... Haru, you must comfort her properly... Me? Well, I'm... Hmm, perfectly fine."

Then she hung up. Smiling sweetly, she stood up from her chair and bowed to the latest arrivals.

"Welcome, dear customer. I've been waiting for you a long time."

"...What are you planning?"

Pendragon looked around. He first suspected a trap, but there were no presences of people hiding.

Wearing an apron, Kuroe did not show any hostility or murderous intent. She was no different from usual.

"This mess of hair looks like it's really worth a cut~ Come come, please sit over here."

Kuroe spun the chair next to her hand once and waved to him. Unknown intent. Frowning, he looked at her.

"Oh~ Looks like we have a shy customer today~"

Kuroe walked over to him and even pulled him by the hand forcefully. Because she was too unguarded, too natural—Just as no one would feel afraid if they saw a baby reaching out to them, the idea of dodging did not enter his mind at all. He allowed the tiny hand to pull him and force him to sit on the beauty parlor chair. The seat cushion was quite soft. His reflection in the mirror showed his brow in a deep furrow.

"Hey... What's this about?"

"Oh! I know, you're planning to stand behind him and cut his throat like this with a razor, right!? Over my dead body, I won't let you succeed!"

"I'd fail as a hairstylist if I ever hurt my customers~ Oh, you two can't separate, right? Then it's fine to stay as you are. It might be a bit tight, so please hang in there~"

"Wap!"

Including Riko who had moved to Pendragon's thigh, Kuroe wrapped the barber's cloth around Pendragon, covering Riko's head as well.

"I-I can't believe you're wrapping me tight with Maximilian together so forcefully... I-It feels different from usual. How to say this? Like umm, the smell of necks... Sniff sniff. Oh! No, you're digging your won grave here! Since I'm staying so close, even without turning into armor, you absolutely won't be able to hurt Maximilian—!"

Pendragon shifted his gaze slightly to look at the adjacent mirror, only to see the reflection of Granaury taking a seat on her own in the waiting area and start reading a magazine. She wouldn't be waiting for her turn to get a haircut, would she?

(So there's really no hostility...?)

Neither himself, Granaury or Riko thought there was any. Even if she had some kind of plan, under these circumstances, Riko definitely could protect his neck and back completely. Otherwise, she could instantly transform into armor to cover him too. Any false move from Kuroe and Granaury behind her was not going to stand back without doing anything. The chance of harming him was virtually zero.

He sighed.

"Although I've no idea what you want to do... I won't change my mind no matter what you do."

"Let's not talk about that. You're my customer right now. So, how do you want it cut? Just thinning it overall will do, right...? If I cut your hair too short, it'll lose that wild feel, so I won't change the length too much."

She picking up a handful of hair lightly, she said confidently. Pendragon did not know if she understood him. No matter how much strength or pressure he exerted, it felt like he was being blocked lightly—like punching a curtain, as futile as driving nails into bran—He recalled this kind of Japanese proverb.

"...Do as you like."

"Very well~"

The snipping of scissors was heard. Whenever the scissors move left or right, Riko's threatening face would move left and right as well. Honestly, it was quite annoying but nothing could be done about it.

"So, let's chat for a bit~"

"This is your actual goal, right?"

"I don't have any goal. It's common for hairstylists and customers to chat."

"There are people who don't want to chat, right?"

"I am a professional, so I can tell from a single look who doesn't want to chat. In those cases, I will work away quietly. But... dear customer, you're not one of them~ You're giving off strong vibes of wanting to chat~"

He sighed again.

"Chat about what?"

"Anything. Just casual chatting will do~"

Casual chatting? This was the goal? He felt even more lost.

Listening to the scissors, he answered questions as necessary. Weather. This country's climate and customs.

Then—The subject somehow drifted to being about her, about him.

Likes. Dislikes. Past. Future. Birth. Memories. About Sekaibashi and his group. About them and Pendragon when they were still in the Draconians. About Yachi Haruaki and his friends. Her time spent in that home. About Riko and Granaury. Pendragon's entourage currently.

Kuroe was in charge of leading the conversation while Pendragon simply responded gruffly. However, she really was chatting like with a normal customer, giggling lightly, making amazed noises, asking questions as soon as they occurred to her. A special skill of conversation unique to people working in the service industry—Even though she was not human.

It felt unbelievable. The scissors' rhythmic sounds. His gradually lightening head.



Hearing some of the things she said, Pendragon almost burst out laughing and suddenly came to a realization.

He had not come here to laugh. He had not come here to chat.

He had come here to obtain her.

It felt like he was getting dragged into her pace.

"Hmm~ That's pretty much it. Want to get your hair washed?"

"...No thanks."

"I see. Then the haircut is done. This is what the back looks like. Wow~ So manly~"

Kuroe took out a folding mirror to let him check his hair on the back. He took a glance—No problems. Instead, it felt quite refreshing, quite comfortable.

He looked away from the mirror Kuroe was holding and stared at the large mirror directly in front of him.

Through the mirror, he made eye contact with her.

She snapped the folding mirror shut and smiled.

A smile as light as floating feathers.

"So... This pretty much... all I can do."

Pendragon felt a vague and unknown feeling in his heart. A sense of discomfort difficult to place. An unclear sense of anxiety. Ambiguous unease. If forced to articulate into words, it was something like this.

His pace was disrupted. Totally disrupted.

What to do—?

How could he recover?

—A redundant question.

No matter how tyrannical...

He deliberately acted according to his own style. That was his only choice.

"..."

He exhaled. Not only that, Riko apparently understood his thoughts from her position directly in front of his breath. Just as she suddenly narrowed her eyes—

"Are you happy now? No more games."

Pendragon pulled the barber's cloth from his neck, spun around and jumped behind the chair. During this time, Riko already transformed into armor. Expressionlessly, Granaury also jumped towards him from the side, turning into a sharp blade during the instant she flew through the air, merging with his right hand.

Landing silently, Pendragon reached out with his left hand at the same time and grabbed Kuroe's neck. Then he pinned her petite body against the floor at full force. Straddling her, he pointed the broken spear extending from the back of his right hand at her.

"You must leave with me, even if I must break all your limbs or tear you to pieces."

Her hair did not move. That was because she understood that taking action was pointless, he thought. Because the one before her was the man infinitely closest to being the strongest.

"It's over."

Implying all sorts of meanings, he said.

Hearing that, she closed her eyes lightly.

After a long time, she slowly opened them again—

As earlier, she smiled calmly.

"...Yeah."

At the same time, she agreed with him.

Part 5

They stood there blankly in the garden.

Taking another look, it was truly a pitiful sight. The trees in the garden had lost more than half their branches and leaves. Although suffering meteor impacts, the ground was pockmarked with numerous craters. All over the place, there were dark red stains making Konoha and Kotetsu's faces grimace. There was also a faint and unpleasant stench. The veranda used for relaxation was all damaged as though bitten viciously by wild beasts. Trails of destruction not only extended into the adjacent corridor but all the way into the living room inside. Not just the tiles, even the roof's beams were heavily damaged. The entire house was probably going to flood if it rained.

It was already nighttime. The fuzzy scenery under the moonlight was already this bad. Once the sun came up, the full disaster would probably be seen even clearer, a sight that would instill despair and sighing in the viewer.

"Ooh... Ah..."

Hearing a moan, Haruaki instantly turned his head to look in its direction.

"Fear!"

"Fear-kun, are you okay?"

On the cart pulled by Kirika, the cube looked like it was shaking slightly.

"A-Ah, I... Right, I...!"

Then she seemed to gasp.

She saw it too, right? Seeing it again, from the front, right?

Extending before their eyes was this home that could not be more familiar—Its unprecedented state of ruin.

Broken and intermittent exhalation, inhalation.

Then—After a while...

It was a very faint whisper, almost inaudible.

"This is also... my fault... right...?"

"Hey Fear...? What are you talking about—"

Just as he wanted to ask her, Fear asked him instead:

"...Sigh, Haruaki. Coming back here... Is it to rest...?"

"Yeah, that's right. After escaping the school, we hid nearby for a while first before finally deciding to return home to rest properly and strategize."

"Then... I'm sleeping. I want to return to my room..."

He really wanted to talk more with Fear. About things so far, about the future. About the Lord of the Knights Dominion—What that man had said.

However, Fear's voice sounded too feeble, making one wonder whether her body might shatter into pieces just from forcing her to talk.

"Oh... Then get some good rest. Also, don't let what that guy said get to you too much."

Something so matter-of-fact, he could only manage to convey one ten-thousandth of his worrying through words.

Fear answered "yeah" ambiguously.

"Then I'll take her inside directly."

Kirika pulled the cart into the main house. Just as Haruaki watched them from behind in a daze—

"Oh, I forgot to mention, the broken glass is dangerous, so be careful when walking around the house~ Because I started cleanup with the accessory dwelling first, the main house hasn't been tidied much at all."

"...Pops."

"Right, did you guys check the mailbox? Is there 300 million yen inside?"

"What are you talking about?"

Honatsu was wearing an apron for cleaning, holding a broom, working on putting the garden in order. Although this was a futile endeavor.

Before Fear woke up, they had already chatted a bit with Honatsu and found out what had happened so far as well as what had taken place here after Haruaki and company escaped. Having rested for a while after their task of stalling Pendragon, the superintendent and the Houjyou sisters had run off somewhere again. Perhaps to check out the school's situation.

In any case, confronted with his father's carefree appearance and tone of voice, Haruaki felt his entire person suddenly relax.

Bending over on the spot, Haruaki sat down cross-legged directly on the soil. Seeing that, Honatsu also said: "Rest, rest!" and sat down beside him with his calves tucked against his thighs.

Side by side, they looked at the house again.

Some parts had changed in appearance, others remained the same.

Still, it was still home. Their home.

Whether the enemy would attack again—This uncertainty definitely existed. However, they still had no choice but to return here. Resting at a hotel or some other place, that somehow did not feel right.

Their shelter where they belonged—Sure enough, it was this place.

If this place were to be gone, it would be very sad. No, not just sad.

It would definitely be despair. As though all the important organs had been plucked out of the body, turning him into a shambling zombie unable to do anything.

That kind of outcome—That kind of outcome, he must absolutely—

Haruaki quietly applied force through his left hand, clenching his fist together with soil from the garden.

"Pops, I... will work my hardest. Although I don't know what I can do, I absolutely... cannot accept something like this...!"

"Yeah. A solution... must be found..."

Honatsu answered, staring at his own home intently in the same way.

That unprecedented expression of seriousness on his face was announcing that he was feeling the same as Haruaki.

Sitting on the boundary wall, Kotetsu watched the father and son pair.

Standing on the wall next to him, Konoha's sharp gaze was sweeping all around. Once attacked, a castle's defenses would weaken. Watching out for enemy attacks was their job.

During this time, Kirika walked out of the main house. Seeing the father and son sitting side by side, she took a seat somewhere off in the distance.

At this moment, Konoha said to Kotetsu beside her:

"Kotetsu, I will leave this place to you and go over to the other side of the house."

Her gaze was like a shining polished blade. He must respond to the trust implicit in her request. He was also very happy for the chance to respond to her trust.

"Yes."

But upon hearing his brief answer, she turned her gaze at him, as though trying to confirm something.

"I understand. Whether coming in from outside or coming out from inside, I shall not let even a mouse pass."

Konoha nodded lightly and exhaled at the same time. Mixed within the breath was slight exasperation.

"To be frank, I don't care at all... Just like how she ran away that time to jump into the sea or whatever. But I know very well that it would force Haruaki-kun to shoulder a heavy and unnecessary burden again... Yes, nothing can be predicted now. I don't want to let her cause even more trouble, that is all..."

She murmured softly. Kotetsu could not help but blurt out:

"—Even if she did not escape, but like that..."

"Like that?"

Despite being so far away, outside earshot of the father and son sitting in the garden looking at the house as though admiring flowers, he still could not help but lower his voice and spoke his mind.

"...Perhaps her limit is fast approaching."

As a bystander, that was what he was forced to conclude. Losing too many things. Suffering too much damage. Rendered senseless by too many shocks.

Then—trying to exile herself because she could not withstand the pain.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I am planning nothing."

The temperature in her voice seemed to drop several degrees.

Then as though to match her cold tone...

Her next words were spoken as her past self whom Kotetsu loved and revered so much.

"I have not the slightest interest in taking care of a crying infant. 'Tis as futile as applying a drop of oil on rusted gears, by mine opinion. 'Tis as though a feeble mechanical trap, I could not even be bothered to care. In other words—"

In order to circle around to the other side of the house, she walked slowly on the wall.

Then she glanced at the main house.

It was the area around the room where the steel cube was sleeping. At the same time, she said:

"If she were to break here, it would mean everything ends too."

Kotetsu could see the side of her face as well as her eyes from the gaps of her glasses.

There was no emotion expressed at all.

Part 6

Fear was standing in a dark room.

The sensation under her body felt like a futon. Kirika had laid it out when transporting her here. Kirika had remained silent without saying a word. In the end, she left the room after touching her corner lightly. Kirika was very gentle when putting her down.

However, she had no spare mental energy to thank Kirika for her kindness.

All she could do was think the whole time—What should be done?

She was cursed.

Indeed. Precisely because she was cursed, precisely because she was something cursed...

For centuries, that was why she had been pondering that question.

In other words—Should she *not exist*?

(...)

She recalled that man. The Lord of the Knights Dominion, Trinac Agana. In the far depths of her memories, there really seemed to be an alchemist standing next to the castle lord. Her—creator.

Throughout the long years, truly, these were long years, she had even forgotten his existence. She also wanted to forget. But under completely unexpected circumstances, she encountered him again. Even now, she still found it quite unbelievable.

Even that kind of man.

Even her own creator had asserted that her existence was a mistake and wanted to destroy her.

Expressed even more explicitly—

Having obtained eternal life from a cursed spear, that man had chosen to gather and destroy objects like her. In other words, that man was driven by willpower of such firm extent, with the conviction that his viewpoint was the absolute truth.

In contrast, she—

"...!"

Her invisible throat choked and convulsed.

It was really impossible to refute him and prove him wrong. Because—

His left hand. The smell of seawater. The odor of blood. Wet clothing. The number of missing fingers.

—She... had harmed Haruaki. This one point was indisputable truth.

As long as she was herself, this risk would continue to exist forever.

Her birth, this form of hers, the fact that she was a cube for torture and execution, impossible to change. Precisely because of that, that man had rejected her existence. After all, she was created with danger as a requirement, how could she possibly not be dangerous?

(What should... I do...?)

She needed the Indulgence Disks after all? The only countermeasure to suppress her mechanisms.

But her unease still could not be dispelled completely.

Having accepted Honatsu's gift, almost sealing up all her mechanisms, leaving only one.

In spite of that, in spite of this current state of hers, she had still harmed Haruaki.

Taking all this into account—Even if all Indulgence Disks were inserted, there was no guarantee that the madness in her heart would disappear, right?

No one knew what could happen. She definitely would not be able to conjure tools of torture, but even so, that was no guarantee against going berserk. If something like the incident on the ship happened again, she might want to kill the enemy before her, even if it meant hitting people barehanded, stealing other's weapons or biting with her teeth. Then in her mindless state, she might kill a certain precious person or tear apart a certain precious person's throat.

Although this was just imagination, she was quite convinced it could happen. As soon as she thought of the density of the darkness in her heart, as soon as she

recalled how her creator had asserted she was a mistake and that her existence was steeped in sin...

Ahhh, I knew it.

Then—

The easiest and safest method.

The only choice left was disappearing herself—

"Fear-in-Cube, can we chat in whispers?"

"!"

Without warning, a certain person's quiet voice was heard in the dark room.

Fear's entire body tensed up. This was—Yamimagari Pakuaki's voice. However, there were no signs of anyone else in this room with all the lights off. Only sound was coming from somewhere.

"You guys were quite busy earlier, right? That's why I took the opportunity to enter the house for a bit, to install a two-way speaker in your room during the chaos. In other words, just in case... Although talking through a speaker without seeing each other's face is a bit rude, considering the current situation, I really can't believe optimistically that I can evade Muramasa and Kotetsu's surveillance to hold a secret conversation with you directly, so please forgive me. As long as we don't speak too loudly, they shouldn't notice."

"What is... your aim?"

"I told you, right? A chat in whispers. I've got something to tell just you."

"Just like what you did to Kirika... If you think you can trick me with some kind of weird deal and manipulate me to your whims—"

"The complete opposite. I want to *stop you from abandoning all action*. Because at this rate, it looks like you're giving up on doing anything. That'd be a bit boring."

"...!"

Perhaps hearing her gasp, Pakuaki chuckled.

"What I want to tell you is very simple. The last Indulgence Disk is in your creator's hands."

"What!?"

"More precisely, it is inside Dainsleif—the magic sword he had obtained during his wanderings across the world—who then became the most ancient knight."

"Dain...? You mean Sleif?"

"Indeed. From her standpoint, it matters not what you guys want to call her."

Fear recalled the maiden knight who wore a visor-like helmet. If she was one of their kind—a cursed sword—having an Indulgence Disk install inside her would not be strange for sure.

"You... know what Indulgence Disks are?"

"Dear me, have you forgotten what kind of organization I'm the leader of? Unknowns—"

"Cut the crap and just tell me if you know."

Pakuaki exhaled as though speechlessly but continued without making a fuss:

"Indulgence Disks—You guys think it's "a device for lightening curses," right? But strictly speaking, they're not. That's just a secondary effect. They have another, original purpose."

"What is it?"

"Do you need to ask? *Namely, to seal your mechanisms. Those things were originally limiters existing to restrict your actions.*"

If anything—

She had already sensed this vaguely—a very long time ago.

Those slots of hers which were the perfect fit for Indulgence Disks, as well as the few Disks that were inside her from the start... There was a clear difference between her and other cursed tools where Indulgence Disks had been forcibly installed. The level of unity was also different. Among them, there was Aiko, a former member of the Knights Dominion, who also had a device installed to reduce curses while acting as a life collateral system to prevent betrayal—called Euthanasia, right?—Compared to that kind of forced mishmash, it was like the difference between heaven and earth.

"In other words.... Like me, the Indulgence Disks were created by that man too?"

"Indeed. To match your design of transforming into thirty-two mechanisms, he also made thirty-two limiters. But naturally, the customer ordered your creation because he wanted to use you, so after receiving the goods, he took out almost all of the Indulgence Disks. By the way, even I have no idea how to take out an Indulgence Disk and put it back in. Since it's related to your core and of a black box design, I don't think anything as convenient as an eject button would exist there. I'm guessing that only the Dominion Lord, Trinac Agana himself, has the know-how to make modifications."

Removal. Asking the enemy for a favor to remove them, in order to fight the enemy. Clearly scared of losing control, yet still wanting to liberate more combat abilities. What paradoxical behavior. Too ludicrous.

"The few that were kept inside you from the beginning... Perhaps those mechanisms were too unstable to use, or too dangerous, or just didn't match the customer's tastes. Anyway, I think they were sealed to prevent mechanisms from malfunctioning."

"..."

"Feeling regret for his past actions, he probably still had many Indulgence Disks on hand during his wanderings. This is the reason why many of the Knights Dominion's possessions have them installed. That being said, many of the Disks were lost outside throughout the years."

Probably because the explanation basically ended, Pakuaki's voice went silent for a while.

Indulgence Disks. Originally kept inside her, created for her, devices for sealing her mechanisms.

But conversely, it meant that the Indulgence Disks were not meant to lessen the curses branded upon her body by the numerous victims when she was used as a tool of torture and execution, right?

New unease. Unchanging unease.

"I understand that Indulgence Disks existed for my sake from the start. But so what? Even if all the Indulgence Disks were gathered and the last one inserted inside me to seal all the mechanisms, the curses surrounding me won't necessarily go away. I might turn to using my hands, teeth or nails to fight in a frenzy, then hurt someone important again—"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that."

Pakuaki said with absolute confidence.

Without forcefulness, without seeming like he was lying, he spoke as though this was only natural.

Fear stared wide-eyed with her invisible eyes, looking up with her invisible face. The room was still all dark inside and she did not know where Pakuaki's speaker was installed.

Fear asked in a trembling voice:

"R-Really...?"

"Of course."

Then he told her the reason.

Somehow, in a tone of voice that almost seemed to conjure the image of him giggling—

"Because—"

.....

.....

.....

Then—

"...Haha."

Fear made a hoarse sound from her throat. She laughed.

She could only laugh.

If she were in human form, the result might be different. Perhaps something might slide from the corner of her eye. A momentary impulse. However, surely, at least she was certain she would show a smile. Hence, she was aware that this was right.

Only one thing was certain.

If that were done, she would never hurt anyone again.

Indeed beyond a doubt.

"Why... are you telling me this? Doesn't it contradict what you said earlier?"

"Hmm, frankly speaking—"

His tone was lively, which actually made Fear feel that he was speaking from the heart.

"I believe that things to research about you have almost been exhausted. This is the final unknown left that I'd like to see with my own eyes."

To the point that the Lab Chief's Nation's leader, whose only interest lay in turning unknowns into knowns, would say something like this—

She was currently at the culminating point, she had this feeling.

She also felt like laughing now.

At this moment, Fear noticed a presence outside the room.

"...Someone's coming."

"Oh. That's pretty much all I wanted to say at the moment. I will be retreating now..."

Pakuaki's voice was not heard again after that.

Footsteps were gradually approaching along the corridor. That rhythm was very familiar.

Hence, Fear quietly waited for that person to open the room's sliding door.

Several seconds later—

"...Hi, are you awake?"

"...Yeah."

Just as expected, before her eyes was his usual smile.

The instant she saw it, her heart overflowed with the same feeling as just now.

She wanted to laugh a bit.

At the same time, she wanted to cry a bit too.

Part 7

Turning the clock back slightly earlier, back to the Yachi home's garden...

Haruaki was staring at the house when Kirika suddenly got up from where she was sitting on the side.

"I'll get some refreshments to take to Konoha-kun and Kotetsu-kun. Can I borrow the kitchen for a bit?"

"Sure, thank you... Need any help?"

"I don't plan on making anything labor intensive, so I'll be fine alone."

"Really? Then it's fine even if you pour out all the tomato juice from the fridge."

"Got it."

After ending this conversation, Kirika walked into the dim interior of the house. It felt like Kirika needed to find something to kill time.

Clearly they should not have time to kill.

Clearly before the final deadline arrived, they must do something.

In spite of that, Haruaki still could not muster any strength. As soon as he sat here, looking at the wrecked house as though admiring flowers, for some unknown reason, neither his mind nor his body could exert any strength.

After running around all day, his body was filled with fatigue. His left hand's wound was giving strange feeling between pain and numbness, suggesting a sense of emptiness as though something important was escaping from there. His mind could not focus, only recalling ambiguous activity records while his consciousness was about to drift away any moment.

No good. No good. Haruaki shook his head lightly while saying to himself:

"What should we do...? My brain can't operate at all..."

"Because too many things changed all at once. This can't be helped."

Originally muttering to himself, the father sitting beside him responded to him. Because he had been cleaning up the whole time, Honatsu was still wearing an apron, sitting with his calves tucked against his outer thighs.

"You're talking like this has nothing to do with you... Don't you have any good ideas, Pops?"

"How could there be none? Rather, it would be better to say that I've been putting them into action the whole time."

Haruaki turned this head to see Honatsu patting the broom on the side while he continued:

"This only happened because too many things have changed. Then the first step is to try restoring everything back to the way it was. I think it's a great idea."

"...That's why you're sweeping?"

"Yes. You won't come up with good ideas if you don't calm down. Going through the motions first turned out to be surprisingly effective, it's really great."

What should one say? It felt too simple and wishful. Haruaki shrugged and sighed.

"Sweeping is all fine and good, but it still doesn't solve anything. What if the enemy attacks and damages the house again?"

"Just continue fixing and sweeping, right?"

Honatsu spoke boldly and simply.

"...Then will a good 'development' follow from that?"

"Yeah, probably. Right now, that's all I can do then wait."

"Probably? This is so unreliable..."

Haruaki sighed again.

At this time, Honatsu turned his body to face Haruaki while remaining in sitting posture. With a smile, he asked him:

"Eh, what's the most 'life as usual' thing for you, Haruaki?"

"Huh?"

"Let's start the restoration from there, how about that? After all, we can't possibly restore everything all at once, so we have start our efforts somewhere critical."

Life as usual.

Haruaki tried to think. At the same time, he kept the same view—looking at the house from the garden.

An undamaged roof. The veranda heated warm from the sun's rays. The pillar where heights were recorded in the past. The old but staid smell of tatami. Everyone gathered in the living room. Konoha slightly in a huff. Kuroe saying frighteningly absurd things. Kirika reciting her usual catchphrase in exasperation. Then, in the very center. The center of their group was—

"Fear..."

"Hmm?"

"Fear in human form, munching on rice crackers, also scattering crumbs everywhere... Right?"

Haruaki squinted and spoke. The dark living room. The heavily scarred living room. These were superimposed upon his imagined scene.

"So... Let's start with restoring that, okay?"

"That's what I want to do too."

But—

"Fear... has suffered a severe shock. The meaning of her birth was rejected by that Dominion Lord, that guy who created her. Also... Because of her curse, she lost control on the ship."

In addition, there was the matter of chopping his fingers off.

"I... What should I say? Like 'don't let it weigh on your mind' or 'I don't mind,' stuff like that... Just repeating those things I've kept saying all along isn't going to change anything... Geh."

"Hey hey~"

Honatsu suddenly extended the broom's handle to rub Haruaki's cheek. Haruaki narrowed his eyes and pushed the broom away.

"What are you doing?"

"This is educational instruction for my overly serious son. Listen to me, the answer is surprisingly simple. When facing difficult things, don't think about anything, just do what your feelings tell you to do. Just like last time, it's necessary to be willful sometimes."

"..."

But this time was different. The situation was much worse than last time.

During his indecision, Honatsu's throat shook as he laughed "hoho."

"The way I see it... I think that Fear-chan is just troubling over boring little things~"

"Don't make it sound so easy, to her, it's—"

"That's exactly it. Although Fear-chan is treating this very seriously, there's no need for us to take such a serious attitude as well. All we need to do is speak to her in a live~ly~ manner from our own standpoint. So what if her existence was a mistake from the start? So what if she deserves to be cursed? Sometimes, right things are born out of that... Stuff along those lines."

"Right things... Such as?"

Honatsu narrowed his eyes slightly after Haruaki asked.

He fell silent for a long time.

So long that Haruaki was beginning to wonder if his father refused to answer, whether he was spouting things randomly.

But after a while—

Finally, he spoke in a calm voice.

Those words were exceedingly feeble, sliding into the world with the impression that they were murmurings to himself.

"Perhaps precisely from understanding curses, these negative thoughts, one can further understand how irreplaceable positive thoughts are. Perhaps precisely from being something that has been cursed again and again—only then can something farthest removed from curses be born and nurtured. That's what this is about..."

Honatsu seemed to be recalling something in a daze, his gaze directed towards the house...

Near the end of his speech, his gaze suddenly shifted.

Towards Haruaki.

Surely, ever since his birth till now—

Over these past eighteen years, his father was slipping up for the very first time.

(Ah—)

His father's gaze and words made him realize something. Could it be possible—

With a mighty beat, his heart began to grow hot.

Haruaki could not help but ask—

"Umm, I've been wanting to find a chance to ask you again since a while ago, my mother..."

His father's eyebrow twitched as though going "crap"—Did he imagine it? That instant was too non-obvious and his father immediately resumed a foolishly smiling look too naturally, so he could not be sure. Perhaps it really was his imagination.

"Hmm? The subject changed suddenly~? Well, I don't know what she's doing, out there somewhere. After the divorce, we never got in touch again, but I think she should be doing well? Uh, this is my—Sorry, I should apologize seriously for times like these and switch back to a normal male tone of voice. It's all my fault for always running all over the world outside. She couldn't stand it and left this home. It's my fault for making her life full of uncertainties. I am really so sorry. Anyway, it was all my fault, I am to blame for all of it, so hate me if you must, son, no wait, conversely, in order to lavish you with double the amount of love, that's why I'm trying so hard looking like this, so you should be able to conclude it's a happy ending, right!?"

He glossed over the issue in full force.

Haruaki knew very clearly, but unbelievably, he did not feel like pursuing the matter to the very bottom at this time.

Regardless of the truth, it did not matter now. Even if he found out, it would not change anything.

Hence, he could only relax his body and mind then smile.

"...No way no way, how is this a happy ending?"

"Eh~ To think I created a brand-new realm of child-rearing by being both parents at once. Oh, I guess I need to let you breastfeed after all? Wanna suck?"

"I-I'm not allowing him to suck! Absolutely ridiculous!"

"Woah!?"

By the time he noticed, Kirika had already returned at some point. She glared viciously at Honatsu who was squeezing his bosom with his arms to accentuate it under the apron, but Honatsu giggled and ignored her. Then he stood up with a grunt of "ooph" like an old man.

"Okay, it's time to continue sweeping~ Oh, Kirika-chan, can I take a cup of tea?"

"Yes, I poured these out for you two in the first place... Yachi, take one too."

"Th-Thanks."

Haruaki took a cup of barley tea from Kirika's tray then turned his gaze while drinking. On the boundary wall in the back, Kotetsu was drinking canned tomato juice with a serious look on his face. Kirika had apparently gone to visit Konoha and Kotetsu first to deliver refreshments to them.



"Puha~ Great, then I'll work hard for a while longer! Kirika-chan, can you clear the cups later and first help sweep up the broken glass in the main house? After that, I'll provide you with an unused room to rest."

"I don't mind, but... Uh, what about Yachi...?"

"The unworthy son seems to have things to do."

Looking at Haruaki, Honatsu winked. It did not suit him at all. Then turning around, he said at the same time:

"Anyway... I think the topic went on a tangent in the middle, but the conclusion is very simple. Since you're not sure what to say, remember that actions speak louder than words. This is an ancient proverb that's still circulating."

The father's figure moved forward after handing the broom to Kirika.

Watching his back, Haruaki also stood up.

Compared to just now—Strangely enough, he felt energy in his body.

Even though what he needed to do remained unclear.

But he knew what he wanted to do.

"The answer is surprisingly simple. Actions speak louder than words... I see? Then it can't be helped."

His lips curling in a grin, Haruaki muttered:

"Then I'll be willful for once."

After that—

"...Hi, are you awake?"

"...Yeah."

Fear's reply was very brief.

The room was dark. There was only the moonlight shining in from the sliding door he had opened. It illuminated the steel cube standing coldly on the futon.

It was as though Fear were saying that staying in that form was the only penance for her.

As though saying it was the only safe solution that would not hurt anyone.

Still withdrawn.

Haruaki narrowed his eyes lightly and reexamined his own heart. What he wanted to do. What he desired—The scenery of life as usual.

To restore it, what action should he take seeing as he did not know what to say?

"Ooph."

Crap. I'm grunting the same way as Pops. Haruaki frowned while...

Picking up Fear's body in his arms. Extremely heavy.

"What are... you doing...?"

This was a willful solution.

What he wanted to do.

Hence, completely unabashed, Haruaki carried Fear in his arms out into the corridor—At the same time, he said:

"Let's sleep together."

"W-What!?"

Although it sounded like a scream of insanity...

For the first time in a while, Haruaki finally heard Fear's voice full of emotions again.

Part 8

His own room. After laying out the futon taken from the closet, he placed Fear on the very center. Then putting the prepared blanket at his feet, he lay down on the same futon—In other words, next to Fear.

"Y-You, why are you doing this...?"

"Because I want to. I want to sleep with you. That's all."

It was no lie. He really wanted to try this.

He wanted to do this with Fear, who had been keeping her distance from him, building high walls using her cube form, making it difficult for them to convey their thoughts to each other.

He wanted to go further than before, to bring them so close together that there would be no gaps, to touch each other once again. That was all.

Lying down beside the cube, Haruaki reached out lightly with his right hand. Fear's body shook—He ignored it and patted her corner gently. Which part of her body did this correspond to? The head would be fine but if happened to be some place like her butt... Hmm, that would have to wait until she reported it herself.

"Speaking of which, you sneaked into my bed before..."

Recalling what happened back when she first arrived here, Haruaki whispered quietly.

Haruaki did not know if Fear was reacting to his words or his hand rubbing her corner, but she shuddered while saying:

"D-Damn... shameless brat..."

Scolding him as usual. As usual? Exactly what he wanted. That was why he did it. Currently, he was taking any damage at all.

"Yes, that's right. I might be a shameless brat after all. I didn't dislike it much back then."

"Wha—"

"I don't dislike it now either. Like this, trying to touch you..."

He changed his way of touching to poke lightly with his fingertip. Her breathing became even more acute.

Then after a while...

"Even like this... in the shape of a box...?"

Haruaki thought for a moment then answered honestly:

"Hmm, if I had to say the truth, your human form is softer. I'd like to touch it too."

"Th-That's your real goal? Hmph..."

This time, Haruaki exhaled. Now was the chance to say what he wanted to say.

"—You became like this because of me, right? I've wanted to have a proper talk with you all this time."

He paused in his motions of touching her.

"On that ship... You went berserk only because I was too weak. If I were stronger, you wouldn't have been forced to do that to save us. That's why... Sorry."

"Don't apologize. The one who wants to apologize... is me."

But she did not continue with words of apology. Haruaki's guess was that she believed that no amount of apologizing would be enough, that was why she forbade herself from saying those words.

The bandage on his left hand. The emptiness occupying it. The vague pain. The cold sense of loss. But clearly, he had already started to get used to his left hand being like this.

Hence, he extended his left hand this time and stroked Fear's body as before. Nothing different from his right hand. No need for concern at all. No need to obsess over it at all. Even if the number of fingers had decreased, he was still able to touch Fear's body. And being able to do that was very important.

"..."

Fear seemed to hold her breath for an instant, but did not say anything. Even if it was only a mere fraction, he hoped his feelings could reach her.

"Say... You became like this because you don't want to hurt us again, right?"

Turned into the form of a cube. Turned into a passive tool of torture and execution instead of an active weapon. Turned into what she probably disliked, her form.

"Yes..."

Haruaki sighed greatly in exasperation. His hand's movements changed to caressing back and forth. As a result, his fingers' pain became more pronounced, but he did not care and said deliberately in a gentle tone of voice:

"Uh~ What you're doing is wrong, can you stop?"

"...!"

"It's not like I hate you in this form, but if you decide: 'I must stay like this forever!' That's really going to be a problem. I'd be very grateful if you could return to your original form quickly."

"Why...? Why... is it wrong? Staying like this, I'll... not hurt anyone again—"

"Nothing of that sort."

He interrupted.

"I'll feel hurt. Wanting to touch the soft you, wanting to see your usual face, I'll feel hurt..."

"Ah..."

Fear cried out in surprise.

Following up on his success, Haruaki continued to whisper:

"I know this is my willfulness, but I still have to say it. Not too long ago, you said you wanted to stay with me, right? I'll answer you right now... I too... want to stay with you. I want to live together in his home forever. So—This is an order. Just as before, stay here."

A willful move. A willful declaration.

However, this undoubtedly came from his heart.

After a very, very long silence—

"I can... stay here?"

"Of course you can. Stay."

Then Haruaki relaxed his tense face. Smiling, he said:

"Somehow I feel like I've had this conversation with you before. Back when you first got here."

But things were different from back then. His own thoughts were different.

Back then, he did not mind whether she stayed or left.

But now, even if she did not want to stay—She must stay.

Because he hoped for her to stay.

He did not want her to disappear.

"But... Oh right. I've been thinking... Was it really good for me to come here? Was the choice I made back then wrong? After coming to this home, what have I done? What can I do from now on? Was I wrong from the start? Still continuing to be wrong until now and will remain wrong forever? I can't dispel these thoughts—"

"Haha, it's because that Dominion Lord told you many terrible things, right? What an idiot... Even if he said you were a mistake from the start, there's no reason why everything that happened afterwards becomes a mistake, right? That guy only remembers you from your birth, but he doesn't know the you after coming here."

"But—In hindsight, I did things with irrevocable results—"

He could sense faintly.

Fear's gaze was directed towards his left hand that was stroking her body.

"What have I done? In the end, everything was wasted effort, right? If it's like that, what pains me the most to this day, that harming a certain person's body was all I could do, then the meaning of my time living here—"

"Like I said, nothing of that sort. The meaning of your time living here? Of course there is meaning. The positive things are too many to count."

"R-Really...?"

"Yeah. The positive effects and changes here after you came. Although I might be exaggerating, there are definitely things that make me feel 'thank goodness'—"

Using a calm voice with a smile of nostalgia, he then said:

"Lemme think... First, from my perspective, I learned the soft feeling of caressing your head, I also learned the softness of your body, the taste of your skin, the pleasant sound of your voice, and also learned your weight..."

"W-Wait wait wait! What the... Those are all embarrassing things! Shameless, too shameless...! D-Don't joke around...!"

Haruaki's smile did not go away. He was not joking. He definitely started with things to embarrass her on purpose, but he was absolutely not joking.

Everything he said was true.

"There's more. Like I know you have a habit of curling up in a ball to sleep. You also love cute animals like cats and dogs very much. I also know that after seeing those animals, you look very cute the way you can't hold yourself back. Then when I see you stuffing yourself with rice crackers, as long as I ignore the matter of the home budget, it fills me with a warm and fuzzy feeling inside, it's really great..."

"S-Still the same stuff! Those are all trivial things, not worth mentioning—"

"But if you weren't here, I'd never learn those things."

Horizontal gaze. Staring at Fear's body, he said with a serious demeanor:

"I've never felt happiness from these feelings before—That's why they're very precious to me."

"Uguu." Fear made a sound like something was stuck in her throat.

Seeing her unable to argue back, Haruaki continued. He did not stop the motion of his hand either. Changing the angle, he stroked Fear's surface. She shuddered again.

"Not just my own personal feelings... There are lots more. In your case, you started doing things you were originally unable to do. Like greeting others, working part-time jobs, also going to school as well. Then there are the people

who made contact with you, everyone is smiling and laughing, right? This is a good thing."

"..."

"Yes, making friends of all kinds of people is a good thing. If you hadn't shown up... Right, we wouldn't have become so close with Class Rep, we wouldn't have known her secret and Class Rep would probably still be a part of that Lab Chief's Nation. Also Sovereignty, Shiraho, Un Izoey, Amanda, Chihaya and Isuzu... We got to know so many people. Let's not forget people in town. Because you're so striking, people in the shopping street all remember your appearance. When you suddenly rushed at someone who was taking a puppy out for a walk, you ended up getting to help walk the puppy every now and then... Oh right, what was the owner's name?"

"...Yamashita."

"Yes, Yamashita-san. That Siberian Husky looked so fierce but was very cute. Ever since you came, Kuroe looks so happy every day and never goes on sudden trips again. Haha, I've also noticed that Konoha shows an unexpectedly childish side whenever she's talking to you. It's all thanks to you... Apart from that... The liquor shop owner started giving us freebies frequently when delivering the soy sauce, strangers starting conversations with us in school has also increased—"

Haruaki found his examples quite scattered and divided.

Without any order, he was simply turning images surfacing in his mind into words. Using the hand with missing fingers, he stroked Fear's body, whispering as though singing a song to match the rhythm of his hand.

Thanks to Fear, things were gained, things had changed.

"Because you eat a lot, I've come to want to let you eat more kinds of food, improving my cooking skill in leaps and bounds. Then there's rice cracker flavors and types, even I've become an expert quietly. I've also started to watch TV shows I wouldn't watch if I were alone. My English grades have improved. When I come home to find the house so lively before I say 'I'm back,' I can't help but

feel happy. Because you have such a strong sense of curiosity, situations where I have to explain things to you have increased, thus making it so easy for time to pass. We've played so many nostalgic games, laughing all the time..."

His consciousness was gradually growing fuzzy. The room's darkness, his own voice, Fear's texture, all this produced an inexplicable and incredible sense of comfort, bringing forth peaceful drowsiness.

"I'm very grateful to you for staying here. I hope you'll continue... to stay from here on... So, hey, Fear..."

He whispered softly.

Leaving his hand continue to rest on Fear after stopping his caressing...

Haruaki closed his eyes.

The sense of emptiness no longer occupied his left hand.

Of course, the fact that he was missing fingers did not change.

However, the cold sense of loss that originally resulted was now—

It was now replaced by warmth as though someone had used their palm to gently cover his fingers.

Part 9

In contrast to his aristocratic-sounding name, Squad Leader Coenraad Johannes van Houten was a middle-aged man with cold, hard facial features and a massively built body like a bear's.

People often called him cold and he had some self-awareness too, but was unable to change. Destroying cursed tools was for avenging his family. Achieving that did not require being friendly. Instead, what he needed was the monstrous strength obtained through physical training, the war hammer skills that were engraved into his bones through practicing until he puked blood, as well as the willpower to complete his mission even if his arms broke.

" ... "

Right now, Coenraad was walking proudly through the school building at night, checking out his surroundings without any carelessness. His mission was being in charge of supervising the students who were hypnotized by Taciturn Chatterbox, as well as eliminating uncertain factors lurking within the school.

Naturally, this was his first time walking in a Japanese school, and a school building at night to boot. He did not have knowledge in this area either. However, he was at least certain that this kind of situation was quite unusual.

Currently at this hour, the outdoors were shrouded by night completely. Even midnight had passed a while ago, yet the students were not concerned at all, continuing to carry out their daily school lives. Like during the day, repeating the same lesson again and again. Of course, the classrooms' lights were on. Taciturn's hypnosis included "not noticing what felt unnatural" as a basic effect, hence within the students' cognition, it probably became something like "today's sky seems a bit dark, let's turn on the lights."

As of this moment, the knights still had not located the Hunter of the Lab Chief's Nation or the other people involved with cursed tools who were supposed to be in school. Did they gather together and hide? The premises were already sealed off completely by «Auschwitz-Birkenau», so the completion of "Knights Dominionization" would only be a matter of time. «Dieu le veut» itself was together with the Dominion Lord with Sleif and her subordinates in charge of protecting them. Coenraad did not think that a few uncertain factors gathered together could do anything, but that was not sufficient reason to let them roam free.

Reminding passing subordinates to "Continue to stay sharp," he also walked into classrooms to investigate, checking cleaning equipment closets, working diligently. Class apparently ended during this time and a large number of students began to rush out of the classrooms. The noise of break time. Although it made carrying out the mission difficult, that could not be helped.

Under Taciturn's hypnosis, the students were unable to see knights. In other words, no matter what the knights did, they would be treated as "nonexistent people."

(Hmph, it's good that Neto isn't around anymore. Were he here, who knows how many people would get violated or killed by him as a pastime.)

At least, Coenraad had no interest in doing indecent things to female students even if they could not see him. He did not have that kind of bestial mind to target children young enough to be his daughters. Besides, Japanese people looked even younger than their actual age... However, he really could not approve the skirt length of Japanese high school girls. Why the heck did they need to show so much thigh?

Pursing his lips tightly, Coenraad walked along the corridor while the noise and bustle of break time filled the hallways.

By the way, there's so much individuality among the students in this school—Coenraad thought. The school rules must be quite lax. Not just the skirt lengths but there were also people who modified the looks of their uniforms and different hair colors abounded. Not just students, but he also saw a number of teachers dressed quite casually.

A man as tall and big as a bear was walking along a chaotic and crowded corridor. He was already taking care not to bump into students and send them flying, but when turning a certain corner—

"Uwah~ I have to run for next period! I've got to wash and clean up properly first!"

A student was dashing extremely quickly towards him. A girl wearing glasses with thick and swirly lenses, with a ponytail tied behind her head.

Indeed, her speed was very fast. Coeraad's arm shook. If it were an enemy charging at him with a knife, he would have instantly drawn out the war hammer from his back—his trusty weapon that had smashed dozens of cursed Wathes

already—then struck the other party's skull or simply send them flying with a punch to create distance.

But this was a slender girl without a knife in her hand. She was merely carrying one of those plastic buckets used in art class. Hence, he had no idea how to react. Then during that instant—

"...Hmm."

"Ohyah—!?"

Collision.

This impact was no big deal to Coenraad, but things were different for someone without the same thickness of flesh. The girl was sent flying back greatly, falling on her bottom.

"Ah, ouch~ ...I fell... So embarrassing—Oh crap!"

The girl looked this way and that then leaned forward to look at the bucket in her hand. Then she cocked her head in puzzlement.

"Eh? It didn't... spill? But it looks like the water became less, is it my imagination...? There's no puddle in the corridor either. Great, it must be good karma from my daily good deeds! Besides, I don't have time to clean the corridor either! I'm so lucky—!"

Patting her skirt, the girl got up and ran away in a patter of footsteps.

"..."

Coenraad closed his eyes and sighed, meanwhile feeling the cold liquid dripping from his bangs.

Regrettably, the girl was wrong. The water had spilled indeed, just that instead of spilling in the corridor, the dirty water in the bucket had spilled on him—But for her, it was indeed fortunate.

Mixed with paint, the water of indiscernible color was giving off a weird odor. Naturally, he was also drenched from head to foot with his coat soaked with dirty water.

"Tsk..."

He was appointed as squad leader this time. As a leader of troops, it would be too improper if he left his appearance in this state.

Looking around, he saw that the girl was already gone. But seeing as she was carrying a bucket of dirty water, the direction she was going must have a sink to wash the bucket. In any case, he decided to follow first.

By the way, why was she running in the corridor while holding that kind of thing? Most art classrooms would have their own sink installed at least, right? Or was it because there were too many students that she had run out to the corridor in a panic? Perhaps due to the scarcity of land, this country of Japan seemed quite cramped everywhere without exception.

With droplets of water mixed with smelly paint dripping down nonstop, Coenraad glanced at a notice on the wall beside him.

The Knights Dominion strongly encouraged members to learn all kinds of languages because their missions brought them to various countries all over the world. Coenraad's Japanese was not bad, which allowed him to read the words written there without any problems.

"...Don't run in the hallways? Good advice."

A well-built man stopped in front of a sink in the middle of the corridor, took off his coat-like upper garment then lowered the hammer secured to his back onto the floor, leaning against the wall by his feet within arm's reach any time. He did not seem to lower his guard at all.

The man turned the tap to let the water flow—

Wearing swirly glasses, with hair tied up, dressed up in Sorashiro Hinata style, Shriaho was secretly observing him from around a nearby corner. Then she clicked her tongue lightly.

"As expected, he wouldn't make a special trip to the shower room... If he did that, things would be so much easier for us."

"No helping it, Shiraho. At least it's a lot better than if he ignored the filth completely~ and continued to patrol."

Beside her was Sovereignty. To avoid attracting attention, she had changed into school uniform—Normally, she always commuted to school in student uniform first. Earlier, she had run quietly to the secretary's office to retrieve it and change.

Shiraho nodded slightly then looked at the man. Un Izoey had cautiously moved around the school building to observe the knights and finally picked this man. Of course, Shiraho did not believe Un Izoey completely when she claimed she could tell just by looking, but indeed, this man really did exude a different vibe compared to small fry... Chiefly because of his body's muscularity etc. However, even if they made a mistake, it was not Shiraho's fault. She would simply scold the dark-skinned girl viciously to her heart's content later. As a side note, due to the dark-skinned girl's appearance, highly conspicuous just by standing around a corner like this, she was standing by under the staircase slightly further away.

Feeling constrained, the knight bowed his muscular lower back and splashed water on his removed coat. He was probably washing the more obviously soiled spots swiftly. The surrounding students took no notice of him at all while they walked along the corridor normally. It was quite a surreal scene.

A moment later, he lifted the coat up to his nose, probably checking the smell. Then he put the coat aside for now. Moving his head under the tap next, he prepared to wash the dirty water from his head—

"Sovereignty."

"Yeah... I hold sovereignty over every doll. Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship. Obey."

After she whispered softly, the tiny doll on her palm stood up at once. A toy roughly the size of a cellphone strap ornament, something intermediate between a human and a robot in appearance. Made of metal, its structure was surprisingly sturdy.

Because walking on its short little legs would take too long and it would be heartbreaking to see it trampled flat by students before it reached the target, Shiraho picked up the doll as originally planned, then tossed it carefully and silently, causing it to glide along the corridor.

When the doll neared the sink, it stood up again, under the gaze of Sovereignty who was watching from the corner. Then climbing up a nearby fire extinguisher, it jumped to a window frame in the corridor and moved from there to the edge of the sink—towards where the man's coat was placed.

The man was washing his head brusquely. The doll secretly slipped into the interior of the coat on the side.

"H-How is it...?"

"Hmm~ Uh, hold on. Heave, hoh, hah... Pocket is... this side... no, or is it the other side...?"

"Hurry."

"I-I know... But I can't see clearly, it's hard to direct it... Oh? Is this it?"

The doll suddenly emerged from the coat, its tiny arms clamping something resembling a cellphone. Then it jumped down directly from the sink and ran as fast as it could along the edge of the corridor, returning to their corner—

Shiraho received the cellphone (not a smartphone but an ordinary flip phone) from the doll's hands then smiled at her lover.

"You're too amazing, Sovereignty. Great job there."

"Ehehe, you're embarrassing me~"

Sovereignty scratched her head shyly. Shiraho wanted to hug her reflexively but managed to suppress the urge. Then she glanced at the spoils of victory in her hand.

"Fortunately, it's not one of those transceivers. Looks like it's just an ordinary cellphone."

"Will this really let us contact the outside?"

"Who knows. We'll just have to test it to find out. Anyway, let's get out of here first..."

Just at this moment—

Shiraho first noticed in alarm that Sovereignty was suddenly staring wide-eyed in her direction.

Then she felt a large and heavy hand grab her shoulder—

Her back instantly froze.

"—*What are you doing?*"

Long before turning her head to look back...

Based on the smell of water mixed with paint, she already knew the identity of the hand's owner.

« **-interlude- C: "at morning"** »

Then—

The sound of faint vibrations stimulated his consciousness.

Haruaki opened his eyes and woke up.

First to enter his view was a silver color.

The sun had just risen. Still slightly dark, the world extending outside was colored navy-blue. She was looking out the window with her elbow resting against the window frame. Blown by a gentle breeze, that familiar color was fluttering softly. Her body was casually wrapped in a blanket.

Probably noticing he had woken, Fear slowly turned her head.

It felt so long ago since he last saw this—Her face.

Haruaki smiled wryly and said:

"Hi."

She seemed shy, embarrassed.

Pouting lightly, she looked away from him.



"O-Oh."

She answered ambiguously. Then as though mustering her determination—but hunching her shoulders awkwardly, with her gaze still averted—she said:

"This is because... You seem like you really wanted to see my voluptuous body. What a shameless brat. Since you said you'll feel shocked and hurt if you can't see my body, and might even commit suicide, it can't be helped. I've no idea what's going to happen in the future."

"No, I never said anything about possibly committing suicide."

"S-Shut up! Same difference!"

At this moment, they made eye contact for the first time. Fear's face, eyebrows raised in indignance. Fear's face, the same as usual. The refreshing morning air. The color of the dawn sky outside. The shiny fluttering silver hair.

All this was making Haruaki feel an urge to laugh.

It was probably the same for Fear too.

The two of them looked at each other and chuckled.

As though sighing "good grief," Fear shook her head wryly then suddenly pointed a finger at him.

"So... Looks like something is making noise."

"Oh, speaking of which..."

Haruaki felt his pocket. What he had been hearing since a while now was the vibrations of his cellphone set on silent. Taking it out to have a look, he saw an unfamiliar number on the screen.

But—How unbelievable.

He was feeling a good premonition.

He somehow felt that the caller was a certain acquaintance.

He somehow felt that on this wonderful silver morning, no other person could possibly be calling.

Hence, Haruaki did not feel afraid at all. Instead, with a "finally here" kind of mood, he gently pressed the button to pick up the call.

"Hello?"

(To be continued...)

Afterword

Although I said in the previous volume that "next volume will be the final one"... My worries came true and I didn't end with one volume! This resulted in the unprecedented measure of releasing the story in separate volumes for the first time in this series. I now present to everyone the first half of the finale, C³ XVI! Oh dear, truly the more I write, the thicker the content gets... How did things turn out like this?

Anyway, it is for this reason that a rare subtitle was added to the title. If only Roman numerals were added as usual, I worry whether people will know that there is one more volume. Since "close" has the meaning of "end," just think of it as meaning the story's conclusion. Well, "close" also has many other meanings... Yeah.

In the past, I would usually use this space to explain the volume's contents a little, but since this book is just the first half of the story, it feels like I have to be careful what I say. Although new characters have arrived, they will still make appearances in the second half after all. Rather, because it's the last, I originally wanted to write some behind-the-scenes secrets about existing characters... But

the higher-ups gave merciless orders saying that the page count was limited! I guess I'll leave the fun for the next volume. Did I mention somewhere that Kirika was originally meant to be a glasses-wearing character...? Topics along these lines. Having said that, I'm not sure how many spare pages there will be at the end of next volume for the afterword!

So, a lot of stuff happened in the process of writing the final episode. Like what I mentioned, ending up writing more and more. My health also deteriorated inexplicably, causing my writing speed to go down dramatically. Just staring at the computer screen for an hour or two would give me dizziness, nausea and headaches. It was a crisis of a lifetime. I originally thought it was my eyes getting too exhausted, but thinking back now, perhaps it might have simply been the stress... I guess there's a lot of pressure as soon as the thought of this being the final volume. With every line I wrote, it felt as though there was a mental class rep inside me, giving off intimidating vibes like preparing for a cultural festival, scolding me strictly: "Hey, male student over there! Are you sure about writing it this way? This is the last volume, you know!?" So I kept editing after writing, then writing after editing. Even so, I finally put in everything I've got and finished the entire manuscript, thus successfully delivering it to every reader's hands. I am so glad.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the help I received again from many people for this volume! Editor in charge, Yuasa-sama, illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, as well as all staff involved with this book's publication, I am truly grateful to you all!

Also, there are all the readers. Perhaps someone might think: "Why hasn't the series ended yet~?", but I've already finished writing the second half, so I expect this volume's continuation to arrive without too much of a wait. Next volume really will be the conclusion of this series, so please continue to show your support!

Minase Hazuki



9784048914338

ISBN978-4-04-891433-8

C0193 ¥550E



1920193005509



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発行● アスキー・メディアワークス

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